The Thule-Atlantis Cycle

Of Edmund Kiß

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To the man who gave me a new heaven and a new earth,
Hanns Hörbiger,
dedicated by the author

The Glass Sea

A novel from primordial days by
Edmund Kiß

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Edmund Kiß

The Lonely One

A thousand years were to him like the day that passed yesterday, or like a watch in the night; and he did not know why he should separate time and space, for to him they were without essence. When his hand guided the strings of the shimmering constellation of the Lyre, the tone of its light resounded through the expanses of the cosmos and faded long before it could traverse the dreadful depths of the world and, beyond the Dove, die away in the darkness of eternity. He knew that the light-sound of his stars reached no further than that of a dim lantern in a thick fog, and he smiled when he thought of his friend Jochaan, the man of the tiny Earth, who would one day live, when again a few night watches had passed. And he rejoiced in Jochaan, the outcast and slave, the chosen one and comrade in his breadth of thought—perhaps because he was an artist and builder like himself; and for him the same measure held, which was lesser only because men counted by such notions, but he did not. For he reckoned with spirit, with nothing else, and he was the spirit. Therefore he knew Jochaan long before he was born, as he knew all that followed the breath of his being between the poles of heaven, and he was Jochaan's friend even before the planets closed their ring about the little sun.

The friend of the great spirit was born when there was no joy in dwelling upon the star Earth, for the race of men, who measure their time by years, and are to cosmic reckoning a race of mayflies, stood near extinction. Many tens of thousands of years, in human reckoning, before Jochaan's birth, a small star ran its course around the sun between Earth and Mars, and was seized by the stronger Earth, just as many millions of years later the Moon, Luna, would be caught in her fetters. This small star men called the "Glassy Sea," because it looked like liquid glass or frozen snow and covered the sky far and wide, for it traveled near the Earth. And men did not know that the "Glassy Sea" was their destiny, nor did they understand when, much later, John of Patmos in his "Revelation" spoke warningly of the Glassy Sea and the fall of Babylon.

When the small star had come close to Earth, inescapably doomed to the flood-tide of the greater sphere—so near that it was only a question of a few short years before it would be torn and shattered and fall upon its great sister—when the flood of the earthly ocean stood piled high at the equator like a mountain, and icy cold encased almost the whole globe in armor of white stone, then the Spirit of the Universe smiled once more; for he knew that Jochaan was born, the man who was his brother, and who would become a master of destiny upon the little Earth, as he himself was in the vastness of space. Small and wretched had the race of men become, after having been happy for immeasurable ages in the eternal spring. When the small star was bound by Earth, then Earth's affliction began. It increased, the nearer the satellite shrank in imperceptible spiral flight. Whole peoples perished in ice and night, and only a few, who could flee to the sky-reaching mountains of the equatorial continents,

escaped the world-encompassing ruin which men later called the Deluge. And because Jochaan mastered the Deluge, the fate of the Earth, therefore the Spirit smiled at his birth, as one rejoices when the echo sent into unknown foggy distances comes back clearly again.

But the smile was at the same time a painful one, because Jochaan would be lonely, as he himself was, and because loneliness is hard for men to bear, and not like a privilege and great joy, which one can carry lightly; the great Spirit knew that Jochaan would have to bear this loneliness. But he also knew that only thus could one be a brother to himself—lonely and forsaken among men, whose blood he bore, yet nevertheless richer and happier than all creatures that the little Earth guarded upon her shell.

When Jochaan first opened his eyes, the Earth trembled, as it had done since the memory of mankind, since the small foreign star had flown so near in its frenzied course around the sphere of his home star. Thick shreds of fog swept in the howling storm from west to east, and snowflakes whirled into the cave-dwelling, where a remnant of mankind, from the last days of the old Earth, crowded together.

But the great Spirit stood beside him. Therefore it was bright in the dark cave of Jochaan's parents. Yet they believed the fire of a nearby volcano shone with uncanny light, and they were afraid.

Then the Spirit stepped forth into the open and spread his arms wide over the old, decayed Earth.

Edmund Kiß

EARTHQUAKE

"I do not understand Jochaan," said the king. "The people are right when they say he is mad. What he does is incomprehensible. Why does he throw colored pieces of cork into the sea and let the raging floodwaters carry them eastward? Why does he dig caves and grottos into the hard stone of the holy mountain and pile up stores that he packs in glacial ice so that they will not spoil—and what more of these mad things besides?"

The queen did not answer.

Her eyes slid briefly and dismissively over the furrowed, harsh features of her husband and returned to her work—the laborious embroidery on coarse woolen cloth.

"Why do you not speak, Aramut?" asked the king impatiently.

"Jochaan is not mad," she replied softly.

At that very moment the floor of the king's hall quaked with short, harsh jolts.

A dull rumbling sounded from the womb of the Earth, while outside the rain poured down and the storm whistled around the low wooden roof, relentless and with dreadful force.

The king shifted back and forth on his stool so as not to be thrown over, and pressed his heavy, fur-clad upper body firmly onto the stone table that stood in the middle of the gloomy hall. A smile seemed to flicker across his face; there was also a trace of irritation in it.

"The voices of the deep give you reason, Aramut, as if they wished to defend Jochaan and his words," he said after a while, while floor and house still swayed with ever lighter, shorter tremors. "He foretold it! Wilder and fiercer would the spirits of the abyss drive their sport with us, more violently would the earth-shocks shake the land, and visibly higher would the floods of the roaring sea-stream beat against the rock-bound coasts of my islands. — There is said to have been a time, Aramut, when earth and sea were smooth and still, when it was bright in the day and dark at night, and the sky was pure and clear, so that one could see the sun and the stars that hang upon it, and the glassy sea was still far from the earth and illumined the warm nights with gentle glow. When might that have been?"

"It was surely long ago," came the calm voice of the woman from the shadowed seat by the window. "But that time was, and will come again, for Jochaan has said so. Yet first destiny must run its course."

"Jochaan, Jochaan!" laughed the king. "And if he tells you the stars will fall from heaven right onto your head, you would believe him too!"

"That also, lord! For then it would be true. In not so distant a time it will be, says Jochaan—perhaps so soon that we shall live to see it; though he does not know that for certain."

The king crossed his arms upon the stone block and laid his hard, thick skull upon this softer resting-place.

With a pleased, cunning eye he watched his wife, whose tireless hands guided the bone needle, rising and falling in steady motion like dark shadow-figures before the half-light of the open window.

"Soon the glassy sea will darken the sun, and it will be altogether night, lord," the woman began after a long pause. "Set the lamp for me."

"The lamp of Jochaan," answered the king with a smile. "So he is not mad after all, but an extraordinary man. Who else but he would have thought of the simple idea of pouring oil into a clay vessel and letting a long piece of twisted wool draw it up into a flame? I surely would not, you must admit. He says, of course, it is nothing remarkable. In his homeland oil flows from the rocks, and such clay lamps have been known there since time out of mind. So it is not an invention that comes from him, but only something he applied that he had long known."

The queen bent low over her embroidery.

A lively gleam passed across the strong, simple lines of her pale face. "No, Tutmon, you would not have thought of it," she confirmed her lord's words.

"Not everyone can be a magician and scholar like that slave Jochaan, least of all the king," he continued good-naturedly. "Things would look ill indeed on our islands if I were to wield the stylus instead of the stone axe—or if I sat by Jochaan's lamp and counted numbers on my fingers, as you do, numbers so great that I could never grasp them, no matter how I labored. I fear the enemy from Nordland would soon be at my throat, despite—or even because of—my learned arts."

"And yet you are wiser than all others," smiled the queen, without looking up from her work. "Who else would have protected Jochaan from the priests and from the high chief of the clergy, Nephat, if not you?"

The king grumbled.

"Above all, let me point out that I am the High Priest, not Nephat," he said gravely, rising up from the stone block. "I would be a mammoth of stupidity if I were to let that man come to harm! He who builds me seaworthy ships and fortresses upon the white rock against the white men from the icy shores of the North, he who brings light into the dwellings of my people, he who strikes water from the rocks in places where no man would suspect it—such a one may be as mad as he pleases; for him I will hold up my shield. As king I must protect the man who brings advantage to me and my land—that much is clear."

"As if you did not love him as well!" said the queen.

The man rose and went to the hearth, where, in a hollow of stone beneath the ashes, a little heap of charcoal glowed. Tutmon blew upon the meager embers. He lit Jochaan's clay lamp and set it upon the stone block that served as a table. Bright and straight burned the small flame upon the black twisted wick.

Outside, night had fallen with surprising swiftness, and the queen moved with her work closer to the artificial light.

New tremors shook the hall and the stone table, and a dying rumble churned deep in the ground.

The king, standing broad-legged in the middle of the hall like a sailor on a heaving sea, steadied himself against the uneven swaying of the clay-packed floor. He and his people had been accustomed to the terrible convulsions of the earth since earliest youth, and they knew it had not been much different in the days of their parents and grandparents; only now it seemed that these shocks had grown stronger and more frequent in recent years, and that some inexplicable, fluttering unrest was striving to swell within the depths of the earth's crust, as though it longed to break into the light in order to find peace. Yet the walls and roof of the king's house were joined from stout, tough tree-ferns that bent instead of breaking, and arm-thick ropes braced the structure on all sides to keep it from collapsing. The forests in the fertile valleys of the Abessian Islands offered good building timber in abundant supply.

Outside, the storm rose to a hurricane.

Thunder gusts howled with a vicious hiss and shriek over the roof of the king's hall, and the blue glare of the mighty lightning illuminated the room for minutes at a time with unnatural daylight.

The queen worked on her embroidery without looking up. Even the daily, uncanny violence of such storms disturbed these people not at all.

The king of the Abessian Islands, broad-shouldered and tall, rough and strong like a wild beast, watched her with calm contentment and a satisfied smile.

These people knew nothing of "nerves," for habit and the constant knowledge of monstrous daily events dulled the sense of danger. Earthquakes and hurricanes were things that no one on the Abessian Islands grew overly excited about; for life upon the tropic-near isles was still more bearable than in the far North, at the edge of eternal ice, where brutalized nomad hordes eked out their wretched existence in barren snow and ice deserts—dwellers in ice-caves instead of in warm wooden huts—who must perish if ever their hearth-fires went out for want of coal.

Of these nomad hordes the king now thought, though without real concern, for his worry was always for the present, for the next hour. Yet he knew it would be otherwise when the time of rains and long cloud-night was past, and his islands gained a bridge of solid ice to the northern lowlands.

Then it would again be as it always was after the cloud-night of the sun's high stand: the white men would come, driven by the relentless cold of the northern winter, seeking warmer land. And then the stone hammers and spears upon the wall would once more find bloody work—work, and little booty, for the light-eyed foes were poor, wretched creatures with simple weapons of bone and fish spines, though they were not to be despised as opponents in single combat.

"Why did we not strike Jochaan down, when my little sister found him that time by the sea?" the king asked thoughtfully. This connection of thought with the men of the North came naturally, for the Abessians slew, from instinct of self-preservation, nearly every intruder into their island realm—not from particular hatred, but because it was necessary, unless in rare cases they took him home as a slave or as a sacrifice for the idols.

The king had to repeat his question, for the thunder of the storm had drowned out even his considerable voice.

"Yes—why did we not do it?" Aramut countered, looking up from her work for a moment. "Because he was quite alone—perhaps—or because some good spirit protected him and preserved him for us, or because little Zista begged her royal brother and lord for his life. When the king's sister Tutmon asks something, they say he is soft as wax."

The king smiled and made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

"I thought at the time he would die anyway, since hardly a bone in his body had remained unbroken," he said after a while, in an effort to explain his leniency toward the stranger. He stretched out his strong frame upon a bed of bear hides that stood by the wall, and continued:

"So not because he was alone, Aramut, nor because the silly little sister pleaded for him! Afterward no one cared to kill him, especially since the king's sister had deigned to nurse the stranger back to health as if he were a blood-relative of the family."

"Will you not still do it?" asked the queen, smiling secretly, though she did not lift her eyes, so that Tutmon could not see her smile.

The man gave no answer to this.

Instead he thought: You are not in your right mind! I should kill Jochaan now? This woman speaks foolish words. Perhaps she only makes another of her silly jests, as she sometimes allows herself with her lord and king.

He turned his angular skull toward the light and looked searchingly at his wife. But her eyes were fixed upon the woolen cloth and her embroidery, and her pale face was serious and still as ever.

"Are you wiser than I?" asked the king, blinking with the one eye whose lid had once been torn open and scarred, and with which he could blink without seeing more or less; for that eye had long ago fallen victim to the bone-arrow of a nomad from the icy North.

"No queen is so foolish as to be wiser than her lord," replied Aramut with dignity, but with a kindly, mocking smile.

"You can read and write, Aramut—even reckon, in a way that is uncanny! Who upon my islands can do that besides the priests, and you?"

"Well, Jochaan can do it much, much better than I," said the queen. "He took dreadful pains with me, to teach me his learning, and it took about three rainy seasons before I had learned even somewhat of what he required. So very clever I cannot be. But—you could have learned it too, Tutmon, and would likely have understood it much faster than your wife; only you would not. That was either stubbornness—or laziness."

"I did not wish to make myself ridiculous before the priests," Tutmon defended himself. "And had the people ever learned that their king wielded the writing-stylus instead of the stone axe, you can be sure that… that…"

"What would have happened, my lord?" laughed Aramut. "Nothing! No, high lord, you simply would not, because you preferred to lie in wait for the mammoth and the cave-tiger rather than knot letters from wool with me and Jochaan or scratch words into a wax tablet with a stylus. That requires patience. And the king has patience at most with his wife, but not otherwise."

"Yes, with you I must needs have much patience," the husband agreed with a sigh. "There are certainly more convenient women on my islands than you!"

"And fairer and younger besides," Aramut nodded eagerly and added with a smile, "Have you not the power, lord, to take what pleases you?"

A quake, mightier and more sustained than the previous ones, interrupted the king's uncomfortable reply. The hall's walls groaned and bent in their stout bonds. The queen's stool toppled and she sat laughing on the floor, though her fright was not small. Deep in the womb of the earth there rose a penetrating hissing, like boiling water straining in enormous tension for an outlet.

The king sprang from his bed of furs and helped Aramut to her feet. He turned her gently this way and that like a toy to see whether she was hurt. As this plainly had not happened, he crawled back with a satisfied hum onto the bear-skins, for there one could not fall over when the floor pitched. His wife sat at his side on the bed's rim and took the angular head of her husband between her broad, worked hands.

"You are a good man, Tutmon," she said, her voice playing with feeling and laughter. "You are strong and kind besides. That is much. That is indeed far more than a woman of your islands can bear."

"Don't speak nonsense, Aramut!" the king stammered, for he felt that he had been unwittingly gentle, and he did not like to own it. This queen at times made it hard for him to play the lord.

"Then I will speak wisely, my lord," Aramut promised.

"I hope I shall understand it," the king replied.

"But you must promise me not to be angry and to listen calmly until I have finished with my wisdom. Then the king shall have the word."

"State affairs?" the king inquired suspiciously, squinting with his sound eye at the woman.

"Worse yet, Tutmon! — Religious affairs, which truly concern us women not at all."

"Perhaps it is best, Aramut, that you be silent on such matters from the outset," the king suggested. — He made a sudden, strong movement to free himself from her hands.

But when the queen actually fell silent, which he had not expected, his curiosity awoke.

"You can tell me at last what is on your heart," he yielded. "Only you must not of course demand that I be guided by your words. What is this business of religion you have?"

Aramut caught her husband's head again. Then she began in a serious voice:

"Go to the temple, Tutmon, the one the priests have newly built down in the city of Tulma, and strike the strange dragon quite dead, the creature you only wounded when you took it. It is a shame what the worthy gentlemen are making of the half-dead beast. I find it positively ridiculous that for that lump of flesh which can neither live nor die since you smashed its skull with the axe, they should build a two-story temple that will one day fall in—so at least says Jochaan, who is a builder and must know. Why do you allow that the creature is worshiped by your people as if it were a true deity? Do you not see that the whole filthy game is directed against you personally, to diminish your glory, which Nephat may not allow the power of the priests to outgrow? Nephat is absolutely loyal to you, that I know myself, but as the slayer of the dragon you are too great for him and must be reduced to the measure that pleases the priesthood. I do not understand how you can tolerate it, when Jochaan has already advised you to forbid the temple-building in honor of the wounded beast and instead to erect an altar to the great Spirit who rules the world! What should this death-wounded monster help or harm? I wish it would die quite soon, so that the mad haunt might end."

The king felt uneasy at these words of his wife. He knew well that the queen, as so often, was right here too. Yet being right did not always suffice when the powers of falsehood were stronger and more cunning than plain truth.

No one inwardly hated more than he himself the lying society of the idol-priesthood. He hated them with the fervor of a noble-born lord to whom hypocrisy, deceit, and cowardice were by nature unknown things, and whose knowledge of them had come only through his duties as ruler and as High Priest of his people, conveyed to him by lesser natures.

He reckoned with them as with unfortunate necessities, but, like most soldierly natures, he did not know how to master them. Though at first he had

intended not to answer his wife, he now resolved to do so—yet tried, as he thought, to shift unnoticeably away from the heart of the matter.

"I could not possibly have foreseen that the beast had such tenacious life," he said lightly. "I could not for all my strength bring down its horn-armored head, no matter how hard I struck at the scaly neck. At last I spared my axe, for it was too precious, and gave it up. Besides, tiger and bear are far more dangerous foes than that water-giant, whose only defense seems to be his armored enormity, and whose only weapon is the mighty tail with which he lashed at me. — And what a thing the people have made of my so-called heroic deed! You may believe me, Aramut, I laughed to myself, though you know I am glad enough to be praised. Yet it is sometimes useful that the king be thought an unconquerable hero."

Aramut shook her head. Her great man was not to escape so cheaply, not when he had once condescended to speak with his wife of these matters.

"Tutmon, you are evading me," she said with a laugh, stubbornly returning to the point. "I was speaking of the priests who nursed the beast back to health, as best they could, and who now carry on their foolish worship with it—so that the stupid people may see that divine honor is given to what the king's hand could not overcome. And you even help these men in their doing!"

"Do not vex me," begged the man, now already more unfriendly than before. "What does a woman understand of such things? I must say yes to certain matters that displease me, and in return I gain advantages from the priests on other occasions. It balances out fairly well, and I shall keep my eyes open. Be sure of it—I can still see very well with this one."

The queen sighed and looked toward the window, for suddenly daylight was pouring in again, brighter than it was wont to seem.

"The sun!" cried the king in joyful surprise, and leapt up from his bear-skins.

The couple hurried to the window.

Through a rent in the clouds the sun shone down bright and white upon the earth for a few brief seconds; then it vanished again behind the thick curtain of cloud that raced with uncanny speed across the sky from west to east. The people of the Abessian Islands did not often enjoy the sight of the sun, and there were old folk who had never seen it at all. Clouds and twilight were the familiar forms of the heavens.

Once more the rain began to patter down; new storms of thunder swept growling over the darkened land, which, veiled in mist, never offered men a clear view.

In the east a vast, murky yellowish glow burned in the cloud-haze and sank with visibly steady movement toward the horizon. As it sank, it steadily faded, until, just before vanishing behind the rim of the earth, it all but went out.

"The light of the glassy sea?" murmured the king, raising his hand in superstitious awe to his brow. "Five times in a sun's course the mighty Spirit hurls the shining millstone into the sea and drags it with him in his furious flight."

"Jochaan says it is no millstone, but a mighty sphere, covered with thick ice like our mountains and all the northern land where the white men dwell—and the round eyes upon it, before and behind, are no eyes at all, but mountains and ringed craters, whose edges cast shadows when the sun shines upon them from the side, and so they look like eyes," replied the queen.

"He should not say it too loudly," sighed Tutmon. "Better he keep his mad science to himself, else one day misfortune will befall the man. You know yourself, Aramut, the priests once wanted to accuse him of blasphemy because he said there were no evil spirits, and the idols of wood that the priests keep standing in the temples were worthless carvings, not even of any great artistic value. He said there was only one great God who permeates the earth and the whole world, and in him all the other gods are more than contained. Let Jochaan beware! In such matters my power is limited. If the priests drive the people into frenzy, I cannot protect Jochaan, even if I would. — How many slaves, by the way, did Galmon give him for the holy mountain? I did not see them depart. Yet they must have been very many!"

"Two hundred, lord," answered the queen. "There were no more than Jochaan asked for, and he will surely have need of them up there, though we do not understand what good his strange work is meant to do."

The king tried to reckon the great number on his fingers. At first he could not manage it, however hard he tried, and stubbornly began again from the start.

Aramut, smiling, took his great hands into her own and counted along with him.

"Two times ten times ten. — Do you have it now?" she asked. Tutmon calculated again on his own to check, and nodded.

"So many! So many!" he muttered after a while, embarrassed when he realized how large the number two hundred really was. "And all for a completely mad and useless task! A cave he wants to hew into the solid rock of the holy mountain, far up on the eastern slope of the steep cliff, amid the desert of snow and ice, where the storm sucks the air so that one nearly suffocates— there he wants to build us a refuge! For what? — Against what danger? Does not the holy mountain quake under the blows of the evil spirits beneath the earth just as here in the warm valleys? Does the glassy sea, that monstrous millstone of the mighty angel, drag the clouds more slowly across the crags up there than here over the green meadows? — Why does he haul food and meat up there and freeze it in ice? That we may have it to eat later, says Jochaan. Later when? Does he think I will ever be so mad as to leave my warm hall and move into his ice-cellar? — Had I realized at once that he meant to take away nearly all my slaves, I would never have allowed it. But you gave your consent thoughtlessly, Aramut! You should not have done that. You too do not know what the building of a cave on that ice- and snow-bound mountain is supposed to mean, and yet you raised no objection."

"Your bodyguard has remained, lord," soothed the queen, calming her agitated master. "Let Jochaan be. He has done so much good that he may be allowed once to commit a piece of outright folly."

The king nodded vigorously and with relief. "Indeed! You too think it madness, what he is doing now? An utterly useless, monstrous madness!"

"Not altogether, dear lord," sighed Aramut. "Though I cannot understand it."

"At least this madness has one good in it," the king muttered to himself. "He is gone from here, far from my court, for half the winter at least, or even longer, since the work, as he said, will take long and not be easy. Perhaps Nephat, the high priest of the sacred beast, will forget him; perhaps his enemies will forget him if they do not see him. That would be no unwelcome thing to me. — But your brother Araton has gone with him! I like it not at all that Araton is with him. I will have the king told to return. We can invent some pretext, Aramut, so as not to wound Jochaan. Perhaps this: that he should come to wed my sister Zista, who stays with your mother at your ancestral mountain farm. — What say you to this?"

"Let him remain with Jochaan, lord," begged the queen. "You know he loves him. You will grieve them both if you call Araton back. And for his marriage with your sister, we have time until winter comes, and that is not far off. Give them the joy, Tutmon!"

"If only I knew what was right," said the king, heavily and undecided. "Araton's spirit lies under Jochaan's spell, I know it well. This slave robs me of

the love of my own, piece by piece, and yet I cannot be angry with him for it. But it is bitter at times, Aramut, to know it is so. It almost seems to me that Jochaan is king and not I; and Araton fares as all do who come into contact with this strange slave Jochaan—this unfree builder who walks the earth with such assurance and sovereign calm, as though he were the master and all the others the servants."

"He is king in his own realm, and you in yours, my lord," answered the queen. "Your paths do not cross, for his realm is that of the spirit, but yours is that of the earth. See, Tutmon, Jochaan is after all only a poor servant—grant him the love that surrounds him; surely it is not wasted upon one unworthy. He has taken nothing from you, he has only given, given with almost kingly generosity what his rich spirit could offer us. Never has he asked for reward, which even you do not withhold from your other slaves when they serve you faithfully."

Aramut was silent for a short time. Then she went on, and in her words there sounded something of secret fear:

"And do you not believe, Tutmon, that he is one of your most loyal servants, one of the few who do not work behind your back against you? He is a man who does not serve you as a slave serves his master, doing only his duty because the whip threatens, but as an independent, free vassal, who offers his service out of warm concern for your cause. Has he not brought you immeasurable benefit through his skill and his art?"

"Jochaan has a good advocate in the queen," muttered Tutmon darkly, turning his head toward the wall.

A heavy silence settled in the gloomy hall after the king's words. Twice as loud and cutting was the storm's roar around the hall.

Aramut reached for the man's hand and wished to speak again.

But at that very moment the house leaned visibly to one side, as though it would collapse.

Aramut clung to the bedpost, which was anchored into ceiling and floor of the hall like the mast of a sea-ship, for the earthquake—mightier and more prolonged than any before—hurled the king's house up and down like a dugout in a storm. Dull thunder rolled from the depths like the enraged bellowing of a colossal chained giant and swelled into a cracking roar, as though the crust of the earth would burst under overwhelming pressure. In the distance there came the mighty crashing of rock avalanches, which the quake tore loose from the primeval stone of the mountains' heights and hurled down with destruction into the valleys.

The king grew pale to the roots of his hair and stared, like a terrified beast, at the black stone table which the force of the first shock had lifted and spun as though it were a feather-light toy, so that it now stood crooked in the hall.

With a crash, Jochaan's clay lamp fell to the ground and shattered.

The roof beams of the sturdy house creaked and groaned, and from the wall the shield, spear, and stone-hammer of the king of the Abessian Islands clattered down.

"Galmon, Galmon!" cried Tutmon in a sudden, breaking panic.

He thrust his wife aside and ran, hands raised protectively over his head, toward the exit.

The door burst open, broken from its hinge, and fell clattering to the ground.

In the dark forehall squatted the men of the royal guard, mumbling prayers with dull faces—stout, brave beasts more than men: some indifferent, most staring with vacant eyes. From the black corners came muffled, fearful howls. Like greenish sparks the eyes of the soldiers glittered out of the gloom.

Galmon alone, the old captain, stood upright on the threshold of the house, clinging fast to the doorpost, staring into the raging storm.

When he heard his master's voice, he turned carefully around and tried to bend the knee, but was nearly thrown down by the repeated shocks, so that his usual salute was badly performed.

"Enough of that now, Galmon!" shouted the king, crouching powerless on the ground like the rest. "Check the ropes—see if they hold—and have new ones ready if they snap. Quickly! The hall will collapse!"

The king staggered out into the streaming, warm rain, blinded by tree-thick bolts of lightning striking all around, lancing down from the night-black heavens upon the earth. Blood-red, muffled firelight flickered in the glowing gray mist, while thunder boomed, echoing from raging volcanoes in the storm's uproar. Galmon stumbled after his lord into the open.

Some bold men of the guard followed like faithful hounds, crawling on all fours, their stone-knives clenched between white predator's teeth.

The ropes that braced the king's house on all sides had partly snapped and now flapped like thin banners in the roaring west storm. Unconcerned with quake or tempest, the soldiers set to work replacing them with new ones. Like cats, the brown figures climbed onto the roof, clinging to the stout eaves so as not to be hurled down.

Dull hammer-blows echoed through the fog. Tutmon breathed again. Blood rushed back into his cheeks. Both hands pressed against his pounding heart. Here under the open sky the heaving of the earthquake was easier to endure than in the low hall, which had nearly fallen on his head! How he still felt the numbing terror crawling along his back! Tutmon realized his knees trembled so badly that he could hardly remain upright. He laughed awkwardly at himself. In his fear for his own precious life he had indeed forgotten his beloved queen! Shame enough for a man—and worse still for a king, who should be braver and better than all others.

"Aramut!" he called back into the hall. "Will you not come out until the ropes are renewed?"

A laugh sounded from the darkness of the house—somewhat forced, but still cheerful and reassuring.

"I will stay here, lord, where it is dry!"

The king grumbled, ashamed. Was this still a woman, who could laugh where terror seized every man? Had she learned this fearlessness also from Jochaan?

"The woman is braver than her hero of a king!" he said to the captain of his guard. "What say you, Galmon?"

"The queen is very brave," the soldier answered cautiously. He took care never to think otherwise than his lord and king.

The old warrior pointed toward the glow of fire in the rain-mist.

"Lord, the mountains are breaking out in flame—wilder than ever! It must be very near, or, if not near, then very dire! I will run and see. If the liquid, glowing stone seizes your city, lord, then it is lost, with all the people dwelling in it. Yet even if this misfortune has not happened, it will still look sorrowful enough in Tulma."

"I will come with you, Galmon," said the king.

THE BEAST

At the gate of the palisade of wooden stakes that enclosed the royal court in a wide ring, the watchman crouched beneath his guard-hut, whose roof had fallen down on him during the earthquake and now lay across his back. The man did not seem to be too badly hurt; blood ran from his nose, and he did not dare stir from beneath the heap of tough leaves and branches. Dull with fright and terror, he stared at his two highest lords and masters without making a move to crawl out and open the gate.

Galmon raised him to his feet with a lash of the whip and seemed very much inclined to thrash the poor fellow properly, since he had dared to lie there in the presence of the king.

But Tutmon, remembering his own unmanly fear at the outbreak of the terrible earthquake, motioned to the captain of the guard to let him go this time without punishment. Where the king's composure had failed, one could not expect it of the brutalized, poor soldier. Besides, the heavy copper-bound gate now hung by only one hinge and could be opened without the watchman's help by a strong kick of the foot.

Over the low mountains in the west the glassy sea rose through the clouds with yellow light, monstrously large and in strangely swift motion. Through a veil of mist one could see for a short while the white, gigantic crescent of a moon, towering across nearly a third of the sky, only to vanish quickly behind the racing clouds, sending out merely its dim light through the curtain that almost always veiled sky and stars from the people of the Abessian Islands.

"Did you see the circular fiery eyes of the beasts, Galmon?" asked the king with a shudder. "They crouch upon the crescent of the crystal sea as around a gigantic table, and stare down on us like evil spirits! They are holding counsel over the fate of men—that much is certain. Even Jochaan did not contradict when Nephat once said so. And under their gaze the ground beneath our feet quakes and trembles, so that it never finds rest. Galmon, Galmon! These beasts will yet ruin us and my islands, if things go on as they have! I will speak with the priests, Galmon—perhaps they may know some counsel, though I do not believe it. Still, one must try all things, Galmon. We shall try to appease the beasts, Galmon, we shall—what say you, Galmon?"

The old warlord shrugged his shoulders, but so slightly that the king did not notice. He had little faith in the arts of the priests.

"Slaughter a few slaves, lord," he suggested with perfect calm. "If it does no good, it will do no harm either, I think. You cannot give your priests

greater joy than with such a slaughter-feast. We soldiers are different. We too slay men, but only when necessary—whereas those men do it from sheer lust of killing. Besides, the rabble likes it, and that, of course, is important. — You know, lord, I mean no offense when I speak thus of the priests. You yourself are the high priest, and my words are really an insult to you as well. But you asked for my opinion, and I must answer."

The king muttered awkwardly and cast a timid glance at the growing, murky light in the sky, which at least had the advantage of producing a certain brightness, so that the road the men walked could be made out with sufficient clarity even at a distance.

"The priests—and especially, of course, Nephat—once demanded of me that I hand Jochaan over to them, that he might be sacrificed to the gods for reconciliation," said Tutmon after a while, with a sidelong glance of his black eye at his bear-like companion.

Galmon gave a grin of amusement, thinking his king was joking.

For Jochaan was Galmon's friend, and for a simple reason: he had taught him to fix the feathers on the arrows of his guard's bows at a slight slant, so that the accuracy of the archers had greatly increased. Since the king's praise at the prize-shooting had fallen to Galmon, the old soldier bore a tender affection for the learned foreign builder in his heart.

To deliver such an important and valuable man to the priests as a sacrificial victim seemed to him an outrageous stupidity—one the king must never commit.

Who had expanded the king's trading fleet, cruising the quiet eastern bays of the Abessian Islands? Who had built the strong, seaworthy warships, far superior to the pitiful canoes of the northern foes? Who had raised the fortress-barriers on the white rock in the frozen valleys of the Northland and stocked them with rich supplies, to block the way of the foreign invaders? It was Jochaan—the strange, ingenious master-builder whom the selfless care of the king's sister Zista had preserved for the Abessians.

"Jochaan, sacrificed?" asked the general, and broke into a soft laugh. "That is a poor jest, lord. If it were not so stupid, I would have gladly made it myself. But it comes only from the priests—or even from Nephat himself? Such jokes only the priests can make; it is their trade, for they can do nothing else, when pale envy sits on their crooked noses. For only envy could make such a foolish demand."

The king laughed as well.

On this point, the warrior caste of the Abessian Islands seemed to be of one mind. In any case, love for the priests in Tulma was not great—neither with the king, nor with his general.

The glow of fire toward which the men were walking slowly grew somewhat brighter, yet still seemed very far away. Ash and stones fell from the air to the ground and, in the pouring rain, formed a sticky, foul-smelling sludge that covered grass and trees.

"It is farther off than I first feared," said the captain of the guard with a sigh of relief. "Your city Tulma, lord, therefore seems to have been spared from the fire. But if it pleases you, let us descend to Tulma and see what happened there during the earthquake. I think we will need to lend aid, for the priests are surely running about in confusion like a herd of mountain goats when the tiger springs among them."

The men turned down into the valley, leaving the red glow of the fire-spewing mountain Peri to one side.

They quickened their steps, hoping to reach their goal before the beginning of the first of the two daily solar eclipses. These eclipses, caused by the giant earth-near satellite, were very extensive; each time it became pitch-black night, so that a journey had to be interrupted in any case—unless torches were at hand to light the way.

The ground beneath the feet of the two men swayed again—more gently than before, in the familiar way they had known since the memory of man. It was nothing new for them to walk over trembling, uncertain earth, for there was hardly a minute in the day when the ground stood still.

Nor were they unaccustomed to the eruptions of Peri; they would have wondered more if he had suddenly fallen silent.

Fear and horror had left them, for these beastlike, simple men forgot quickly—and had to forget quickly—if they wished to live.

That the tropical rain poured down upon them in torrents like from buckets disturbed them not at all; such was the way of the cloud season. Only today the warm rain was dirty and turbid, leaving gray-black streaks on their coarse, furrowed faces—the loosened ash from distant volcanoes.

A stone the size of a fist struck the grass beside the king and rolled a little way downhill before coming to rest. Yellow as sulfur, it steamed in the rain. Tutmon glanced half-curiously at the rough messenger from the earth's depths, thinking that there was still plenty of room beside his head for such projectiles, and that, fortunately, not every such ball found its man.

Warm streamers of mist, lashed by the stormy west wind, swept across the slope, dimly lit by the yellowish glow of the glassy sea, which grew weaker from minute to minute; for the moon—the ancient predecessor of our present nightly lamp—on its swift path about the earth, a journey it made five times each day, now waned rapidly before sliding in front of the sun.

But before the raven-black darkness of the eclipse covered the land, the two wanderers had reached the first houses of the city of Tulma, the only city of the Abessian Islands and the trading center for the many tribes and races that pressed together from the tropical island refuge of today's Abyssinian highlands.

The red firelight of the volcano lit their way between the low wooden huts, where busy hands were already working to restore fallen roofs and broken supports or replace them with new ones—for here too the terrible shocks had wrought destruction, on an even greater scale than at the solidly built and braced king's hall on the mountain.

Brown naked figures darted through the alleys like strange, animal-like beings. Children cried in the darkness, somewhere a woman quarreled with her husband.

A dim fireglow flickered through the rain as king and general came near the newly built temple of the wounded beast. But the place where the proud structure had stood was empty; only a heap of wild rubble showed the newcomers that the earthquake had not spared the new sanctuary.

"The priests' favorite building has collapsed—and thoroughly," said Galmon, his voice clearly betraying satisfaction that the disaster had done its work well, precisely in a place which, though he feared it in the superstition of his age, he also hated with fervent passion.

The new two-storied temple truly stood no longer! In the street's mud lay the corpses of two temple-servants, crushed in the collapse, and at the gate of the temple court the wounded whimpered, their comrades binding them with first bandages.

Figures in wet, gray-white, soiled garments wandered clumsily among the heaps of debris, smoking torches in their hands that, though soaked by the downpour, had not yet gone out—moving without purpose, for they gave no heed to the faint cries for help that rose from under the tangle of tree-trunks and liana-ropes. It was as Galmon had guessed: the priesthood of Tulma ran about in confusion like a herd of mountain goats.

In the courtyard, beneath broad-fanning palms, stood an older dignified man, his black full beard dripping with wet, amid a small group of his clerical

brethren. Leaning against the stone railing of a great water basin, he shone his resin-soaked torch—still unextinguished despite the pounding rain—down into its depths.

Reverently and attentively the other men also gazed over the balustrade, as though there were something of great importance to see in the black depths below.

Unnoticed, Tutmon and Galmon stepped up behind the group.

"What are you doing here?" asked the king in a loud voice into the silent assembly.

No answer came at first, for the voice of the ruler of the Abessian Islands had its usual overpowering effect; the gathered priesthood turned in alarm and fell to their knees before their lord and master.

"Rise, venerable sirs," said the king with his customary, majestically friendly tone—such as the lords of the temple deemed their due—and with a motion of his hand that passed in blessing and acknowledgment around the circle over their bowed, smooth-shaven heads. "The great Spirit, I hope, has held his protecting hand over the beast."

The mention of the great Spirit was a small piece of malice. The term "great Spirit" had been introduced by Jochaan, and the king spoke this name deliberately in contrast to that of the beast, which, as a deity, seemed to have come off rather poorly.

Galmon had the urge to laugh at his lord's slyness, but he restrained himself. To laugh at the wrong place was dangerous and unfitting among the circle of idol-priests.

The high priest Nephat was the first to rise and step toward the chief cleric of the Abessian realm. A temple-servant took the torch from him.

At a sign of his hand, the lower attendants of the sanctuary withdrew out of earshot.

In the polished, smooth features of the high priest were written both anger and fear; the invocation of the great Spirit as protector of the beast had wounded and vexed him deeply. But he was cunning enough not to contradict the king. His keen black eyes looked uncertainly into the one clear eye of the king, which rested upon him with restrained malice.

"What has become of the beast, Nephat?" asked Tutmon, with a directing gesture to the captain of his guard. Galmon withdrew at once, though

he would have liked to hear whether the scaly water-monster had at last given up the ghost or not.

"I do not yet know, lord," replied the high priest, in a tone that clearly betrayed his worry lest misfortune had befallen the new idol-beast. "I was just listening down into the water-cage as you came, to determine if anything still stirred below—but it remained deathly still."

"Then descend into the dragon's chamber and see for yourself whether it lives," suggested the king.

In this demand, too, there lay a small malice; Tutmon knew well that descending to the armored water-dragon was no delight, even for a high priest of Tulma, and that this demand required of Nephat a measure of courage he most likely did not possess.

"Or send the keeper down," the king relented, seeing Nephat's face take on an almost desperate look. After all, it was unwise to risk offending so powerful and influential a man.

"Gil, the pious keeper of the beast, lies with a broken shoulder in his hut, lord," the cleric replied with a breath of relief. "It will therefore not be possible to send him down."

"Then fetch me a torch—one that is dry and burns well," Tutmon said good-naturedly. "As High Priest of my people I will myself see whether any harm has befallen the god-sent creature."

It seemed to the king as though a heavy weight had been lifted from Nephat. A quiet laugh ran through the one-eyed warrior's heart. What a paltry fellow he was compared to him, the king! He had gone oddly pale beneath his coal-black beard. And now how he threw himself again into his chest, now that the burden had been removed.

Tutmon took the glowing torch from a hastening servant and descended the stone steps into the water-chamber.

Behind him he heard cautious footsteps feeling their way down. He turned, surprised. Had Nephat changed his mind and decided to accompany him into the underworld?

No — it was not the high priest of the sacred beast. Galmon, the faithful, came with him! — Of course; how could it be otherwise? A comrade does not abandon a comrade.

"Take my stone axe, lord," whispered the rough voice of the old general. "Perhaps you will try again, if the beast has not yet died, and strike hard—even if the axe should splinter."

The king paused in his descent.

This came at exactly the right moment, for the light stone steps had been shattered by the quake and lay in fragments on the bottom of the chamber, whose tiled lining had burst open in several places. Consequently the water had run off through deep fissures into the interior of the earth. The king peered, without taking the offered axe, into the torch-lit gloom. The wet walls of the cage gleamed green with grown algae and foul mud.

A shapeless, giant mass lay motionless at one side of the basin in a murky remnant of water, greenly overgrown like the walls and, in spite of its size, hard to make out. Yet the wicked glint of a small yellow eye showed that the dragon was not dead.

Its long scaly neck lay limp on the bottom, stretched out in the stinking mud. The head was grotesquely swollen on one side—there the king's stone axe had tried in vain to strike life down.

Now the horn-armored thick tail of the giant moved softly, and the flanks of the mighty belly began to tremble. Slowly and clumsily a short, clawed foot groped in the muck. Galmon squeezed up beside his lord and stared with curious interest at the strange, rare creature for which a whole two-story temple had been erected!

"I think it is frightened, lord!" the old man chuckled softly. "Shall I throw a stone at its flank to rouse it? Otherwise we will not get it out of its tedious rest."

The king shook his head. Unnoticeably he motioned upward, where in the circular patch of the dark, blood-red sky a black figure leaned over the railing. "Do you not see Nephat looking down from the balustrade?" the king whispered in Galmon's ear.

The old soldier peered cautiously upward.

"Then let us leave the beast in peace," he said, though his voice betrayed how hard that renunciation was to him. "This is really a stupid business," he went on quietly. "The stair is broken in two. If we jump down into the chamber, we will stand up to our knees in rotten sludge, and withdrawal will not be easy—especially if the dragon should take it into its head to resent the visit of the king and his man. It will not remember us kindly, for its head looks

like the bloated belly of a great Tulma merchant who cannot rid himself of his debts. I propose, lord, that I go back up and fetch a ladder, for otherwise..."

The old warrior's lively commentary was, unfortunately, cut short, for at that very moment a heavy mass whipped through the air like a gigantic lash and struck with a wet smack against the side of the stairs, close beside the men.

King and general sat down rather abruptly—and very quickly—upon the stone steps.

The dragon had opened its attack on its vanquisher with a blow from its massive spiked tail, but at once lay still again. Only the yellowish eye gleamed from the darkness, threatening and eager to strike, where the torch hissed out in the muddy bottom of the water basin.

"What a beast!" said Galmon, startled.

Tutmon laughed. The matter had turned out lightly enough, but could easily have been far worse. The creature had seemingly lashed out at the unfamiliar firelight of the torch and was satisfied now that it had been extinguished.

"I'll strike its tail with the axe!" Galmon burst out angrily, for the tip of the tail lay most temptingly within reach on the lowest step of the stair.

Before the king could prevent his old general, the soldier's heavy battle-axe came down upon the sensitive tip of the dragon's tail with a dull crack.

Fortunately both men leapt up the steps at once, for the beast, after this provocation, grew truly lively and began thrashing its abused tail incessantly into the narrow stairwell where its tormentors had just been standing.

Galmon sat himself down at a safe distance on one of the upper steps and laughed until tears ran down his cheeks.

His king and lord stood beside him, vexed, not knowing whether he should laugh too.

Above, the high priest of the sacred beast appeared at the entrance of the stair. On his face was written clearly the rage at the wicked deed of the old soldier.

He did not spare his reproaches for the crime committed against the holy dragon.

"I only wished to see how much life was left in the creature," Galmon defended himself quickly, with presence of mind. "Had you struck me with a stone axe upon my backside, venerable Nephat, you might have witnessed something similar in me."

The king burst out laughing.

The high priest's attempt to treat the matter seriously was undone by the words of the old warrior. No one could take this man seriously, for he played the part of the stupid, harmless soldier so masterfully, as though unaware of the impropriety of his deed. It was only fortunate that no other witnesses had been present. Thus the priest subdued the involuntary laughter rising in him into a mild smile.

In the black depths of the chamber, the horned tail of the water-monster still lashed for a while in blind rage against the stone walls of the stair. Then it grew deathly still again, as before.

The men stood in pitch darkness, softened only by the gloomy red of the smoldering torches and the dim glow of the fire-spewing mountains.

The earth quaked ceaselessly beneath their feet; now the upper steps of the narrow stone stair and part of the balustrade came crashing down into the prison of the sacred dragon. Visibly the temple courtyard rose and fell in short, violent jolts. With crackling shocks, the heap of ruins of the sanctuary shifted and settled.

The king turned a shade paler and cast a meaningful glance at his faithful Galmon.

It had been high time indeed that they had climbed back to the surface, or else they would both now be trapped with the saurian—or lying with shattered limbs upon the broken slabs in the slime of the water-pit. Tutmon could only be thankful to his subordinate that the reckless blow with the stone axe had been struck!

The captive beast in the black depths gave a hideous, terrifying roar, so that the men involuntarily stepped back. The high priest clutched his brow in invocation and bowed fearfully toward the direction whence the primal cry of the tortured giant rose. From Nephat's brown face all blood had drained, and his bearded chin sagged trembling.

Holding their breath, the men listened to the roaring and thunder beneath their feet, where gigantic explosions of steam forced their way and hurled the earth's crust upward like a light blanket.

Through the darkened city rang the shrill cries of terrified women wandering the streets. Despite the pouring rain, some huts had caught fire, and the flames flickered ominously through the blackness. Helpless, paralyzed with terror, the men stood in the middle of the temple court, when a bolt of lightning, thicker than a tree, struck with unbearable crash into the ruins of the temple, so that a flame-tongue as high as a house shot roaring upward.

Nephat fell to the ground and buried his face, wailing, in his soiled white robe.

The king and Galmon, too, were thrown down, but they rose quickly to their feet again. They did not howl, though perhaps they felt like it, but clung to one another so tightly that their faces nearly touched, panting with terror and dread.

With staring eyes the two soldiers looked at one another.

Galmon was the first to regain his careless cheer, when he saw that his king and he were unharmed.

"I'm nearly deaf, lord, from the crash of that lightning!" he said breathlessly, and released his king in embarrassment—though the king had clung to him just as tightly as he to the king.

"Can you hear me?" Tutmon well understood his general, but his voice sounded as though it came from far, far away.

"The thunderclap has deafened my ears," Tutmon replied, embarrassed and bewildered. "I felt it clearly."

"Not entirely, dear lord," laughed Galmon. "Else you would hear nothing at all! But it is terrible, how the earth dances, as if it had gone mad—like Jochaan, your builder on the holy mountain! How must the lightning rage around him up there! Do you think he laughs today too, while the others tremble? Do you think he remains calm when the rocks sway up and down like the waves of the sea? Now I would truly like to be with him, to see whether his wisdom holds firm—or whether he, too, becomes small, like us. — There! Now our last torch goes out! Lucky that the new temple burns a little—though a wonder, at that, given the wet, fresh wood the priests used for its building."

"They should never have built two stories, those fools!" said the king. "Jochaan declared it nonsense at once when I laid the plan before him. Such a tall structure must inevitably collapse; if it were to be built at all, the arrangement must be quite different. But he said he had no desire to draw and calculate the designs for such a purpose, unless I expressly commanded it. I did not command him—and now I am almost glad of it. For the queen was likely

right: the whole nonsense with the water-dragon was aimed against me and my renown. Now it pleases me doubly that the priests ignored Jochaan's counsel. They will now know it is unwise to do so again."

"Well, the lightning would have struck even if ten more stories, calculated by Jochaan, had been raised upon it," Galmon replied thoughtfully. "The glory would still have gone to ruin, with or without Jochaan's aid. The priests should have forgone the whole building altogether—that would surely have been the wiser course. Now the pile of wood, which cost such disgraceful sums, lies burning on the ground."

The old soldier's eyes rested on the high priest, lying upon the paving stones of the court.

Was the man dead? Or only feigning?

Galmon suddenly had the strong urge to find out in his own way—by giving the holy lord a gentle stroke on the backside with his whip of plaited mammoth-hide. Perhaps he would come to life as quickly as the sluggish dragon in the water-pit had done when Galmon tapped its tail with the axe!

The temptation to carry out this pleasant thought was so strong that Galmon had to step back several paces and turn his eyes away from the place of his desire.

Perhaps even in the days of the approaching Flood there was such a thing as thought-transference, for Nephat, unaccountably, clutched at his backside and turned around very quickly. His eyes rested on the old warrior with unfriendly suspicion.

"I only thought it!" said Galmon, guilty, but with a friendly smile.

"What did you think?" asked Tutmon, surprised.

Galmon stammered and was almost glad that Nephat, owing to a new earthquake shock, lost his balance and was thrown to the ground. Thus the soldier was spared having to explain words that only he himself would have understood.

It became day again.

The hurrying moon had passed by the sun and had released it for a few short hours, during which it must continue its hunted course around the earth. With the growing light the violent movements of the ground seemed also to subside. Once more the danger seemed past!

Whoever had not been overtaken by destruction breathed free and with joy.

From all sides the priests slowly and timidly returned—whom lightning and earthquake had driven in wild flight far away. Downcast and dispirited, they crowded together in the courtyard of the sanctuary. Their dignity had fallen from them like a mask.

Tutmon beckoned with his hand.

Then they crept up like beaten dogs. Only their high priest Nephat had regained his composure, and stood upright and proud beside his highest spiritual and temporal lord.

Galmon's furrowed old face was twisted into a mocking grin. He rejoiced at the pitiful sight of the haughty priests, who had once been fond of honoring him—the old, seasoned soldier—with kindly contempt.

"Take bandages, venerable sirs, and follow me into the city," commanded the king. "I fear your medical skill will be needed in many a hut."

"And the destroyed temple, lord?" asked Nephat quickly.

The king was about to flare up angrily and reply harshly, but thought better of it—and wiser too—for he knew that the time might yet come when he would need the influence of the priesthood over the shaken people.

"We shall rebuild it, of course!" he said calmly.

"However, it must not again be in two stories—for my money is too dear to me for that—but only in one, as Jochaan said. Indeed, I would be glad, noble and venerable sirs, if the words of this foreign scholar were given more heed in the future. We might easily have spared ourselves this loss."

The priesthood knelt before the king upon the ground, their heads bowed.

Galmon bent as low as he could to observe the faces of the men, for he knew that the reminder of Jochaan's superiority in technical matters was unwelcome to them.

"I think, lord, that fellow back there—a bald one—presumed to laugh at the king's words!" he whispered to his master.

Tutmon made a dismissive gesture, yet his scarred eye twitched with amusement.

Truly, one could not take the captain of his guard into such company; he always managed to ruin the king's finest addresses with his ill-timed remarks.

Galmon drew back, his face distressed.

He knew well the meaning of his royal lord's gesture. It was serious! He had just committed what, many hundreds of thousands of years later, would be called a faux pas. But at the same time he also knew it was neither the first nor the last—for his manner, clumsy and coarse as always, was here as elsewhere a conscious pretense.

Edmund Kiß

ZISTA

Zista, the king's small and delicate sister, sat in her grotto on the seashore, sheltered from the torrents of rain pouring down, and gazed thoughtfully at the great yellow glow of the glassy sea rising in the west. Nearly a third of the sky glowed, despite clouds and mists, under the light of the earth-near satellite. The walls and floor of the cave rocked and heaved under the unbearable pull of the moon's gravity, which allowed neither land nor sea to rest.

For centrifugal and centripetal forces bent, tugged, and pressed the crust and entrails of the earth-star in every direction during the moon's five daily circuits, so that through fractured fissures of the solid surface the groundwater struck against the fiery-fluid depths and, in vast steam explosions, kept the weakened crust in perpetual jolting motion.

With colossal surf, the turbid floods of the world-ocean—heaped into titanic tides by the moon—swept in their rapid course over most of present-day Africa and the landmass of Central America, and battered against the rocky coasts. They surged nearly up to the grotto where the girl sat, before sliding back down a slanted, smooth-polished stone ledge into their deep, churning bed. Dirty yellow, the foam-crested mountains of water rolled in before the west storm, cloaked in clouds and thick fog, covering kilometers deep the lowlands and terraces of what is today the Sahara Desert.

Zista's bare, brown limbs rested softly upon a panther skin. Her beautiful, slender arms folded beneath her small head, she lay there comfortably, blinking lazily, like a sleek, well-fed predator, her back leaned against the body of a splendid wolfhound. She thought of Jochaan—the stranger, the unfathomable one—Jochaan, the king's slave, who lived only because she, little Zista, had been there to save him.

It had been very long ago when this had happened. Five times the cloud-season had passed, and the sun-season of winter had come again, since she had looked from her grotto down at the sea foaming far beneath her.

Then the winter had just begun, and it did not rain endlessly as it did now, but only a few times a day, so that it was a joy to be out in the open.

There she had seen a wondrous, long-shaped vessel dipping up and down in the foaming surf—a tree trunk of gigantic thickness and size, such as did not grow on the Abessian Islands. That it could not be an ordinary tree, the little king's sister recognized at once, for at its bow there was clearly to be seen a short stump of a mast, and at its stern hung a half-shattered rudder.

She descended to the shore to look at the marvel more closely, but had to wait long until at last a wave flung the trunk in between the rocks and, relieved of its burden, rolled back again.

At the bow, near the mast stump, there was fastened to a strong copper ring a rope that dragged behind in the retreating water.

Zista seized it and quickly wedged it under a rock the surf had thrown there, so that the next wave would not drag the vessel back out to sea.

Then she sat down in the steaming sand between the cliffs and waited patiently until the short ebb came and left the boat high and dry.

It was a beautiful ship she had found there—more beautiful than any in her royal brother's fleet, whether anchored in the harbor of Tulma or cruising the straits to the north and east of the islands. Hull and deck of the vessel were carved and hewn solid from a single piece, apparently hollowed out inside by fire and weighted at the bottom with metal so that it could not capsize—for in the rushing surf it had always righted itself again.

Only in the middle was there a hole worked into the deck, just large enough for a fully grown man to slip through comfortably.

But the hole was firmly sealed.

A resin-soaked cloth, stitched together in several layers, closed the small entrance watertight, and the ends of the cords that held the cloth around a low railing ran through eyelets into the interior of the ship.

With the sharp stone knife she carried in her hipcloth, Zista cut out a round piece of the tough covering, for she suspected that someone was inside who had tightened and tied off those cords.

There she found the man she now thought of—Jochaan, the king's builder, the foreign, unwilling immigrant into the Abessian realm, whom the swiftly rushing sea had cast up at the coast beneath her grotto.

His lean face was covered in blood, his body battered, and both arms badly broken so that the bones protruded. At first the girl thought the man dead, until a faint trembling of the eyelids revealed to her that life had not yet departed.

Her curiosity and her womanly pity for the helpless stranger awoke. She tried to pull the heavy man out of his craft, but her young strength was not enough. Again and again the lifeless body slid back whenever she had dragged him partway over the railing. In despair she stopped.

Already she was about to run home to fetch help when the stranger—perhaps roused by the pain she caused with her clumsy grip—awoke and slowly crawled out. Zista was very glad of this, for she shuddered to think what would have happened had she summoned her brother; they likely would have struck the stranger down at once, since he was already half dead, or carried him off to be sacrificed to the idols.

Now the wounded man, with Zista's help, slowly climbed up the rocks, but it took an endless time before the stranger lay at last in the grotto, his pale, bloodied head resting in the girl's lap.

His large, compelling eyes smiled when he saw above him Zista's flower-framed brown face. His lips moved faintly, and in a tongue wholly unknown and strange to the girl he tried to speak his thanks. The kind smile in his eyes had saved the foreign builder's life, for Zista never forgot it and at once resolved to protect her find and defend him against both her brother and the priesthood.

She helped the shipwrecked man set his shattered arms and marveled that he did not scream in pain, but even laughed a little when she pushed the bones back into the flesh. Soon, however, he fell asleep from exhaustion.

In the days and nights that followed, the king's sister cared for the wounded man. Whenever she could, she secretly slipped away with her wolfhound Sperr to her grotto by the sea, where she splinted his broken arms as best she could, bandaged his wounds, and nursed and fed him like a child, since he could not use his arms.

She dared not confess her strange living discovery to her brother, for she still feared he might kill the stranger outright or hand him over to the priests, who would gladly welcome him as a sacrificial victim. And she could not be sure her protest would be heeded.

Although at other times she had liked well enough to watch when the priests slaughtered men, in this case she feared that Jochaan might meet the same fate—for she had come to love the man with the wonderful, intelligent eyes.

But then came the time when Zista could no longer conceal her rescued friend. Her frequent absences were at last noticed, even if no one cared much for the child otherwise, and the beautiful secret was discovered.

The king himself surprised the two in the grotto—to the girl's great alarm—while she was feeding her patient warm soup that had steamed less than an hour earlier on the royal table.

What Zista had feared did not come to pass. Jochaan was neither killed nor sacrificed. He was simply made a servant of the king, like the other slaves.

No one understood his language; no one knew where he had come from, for never before had any living being been washed ashore on the Abessian Islands across the raging ring-flood of the world-sea.

One day, Nephat, the High Priest of Tulma, had demanded the stranger as a sacrificial victim. That was a dreadful time for Zista, until the decision was made in her favor.

To please his sister, the king, Tutmon, refused to allow the foreign man to be sacrificed. He kept him at his court like some strange exotic animal, kept out of curiosity, even though no one could guess whether the sounds he made were a language at all.

But faster than the simple folk at Tutmon's court had imagined, Jochaan learned the tongue of the land. He even befriended the very High Priest, Nephat, who had once wanted to slaughter him, delved into his ancient writings carved into stone tablets, and, to the astonishment of the priesthood, soon knew their simple characters better than many a temple servant.

Jochaan also wrote his own language, in the manner of his American homeland, in knotted woolen letters, and he invented a new way of writing—using a stone stylus on wax.

Zista watched with the wistful pain of a child's heart as, year by year, Jochaan cared less for her, his rescuer. At first, when she was still nearly a child, he would sometimes lift her in his once-broken but now strong arms, kiss her smooth brown cheeks and her narrow hands adorned with rings. But later, as she grew taller and ever more beautiful, he would only nod kindly to her when he entered the king's hall, perhaps kindly stroke her dark hair, and then sit with the queen, teaching her to read and write.

Why did Jochaan concern himself so much with Aramut?

Was the queen truly more beautiful and younger than she—she, the fairest, most radiant maiden on her brother's islands, courted even by Araton, the proud brother of the queen?

Zista was well aware of her physical charms and exploited them readily to try to bind the foreign man to her.

But the opportunity was lacking. Moreover, Jochaan was a slave—an ordinary servant—even if he had become the king's master builder and traveled freely and with great authority to the northern lands to pursue designs that were

either his own or those born in the king's head. The fact remained: Jochaan was a slave.

She, however—the king's sister, of the ancient house of Tutmon—was permitted to marry only within her own rank or into an equal family.

And now the king had decided that, when the time of clouds had passed, she should wed the queen's brother, the young prince Araton. There was, after all, no other suitor worthy of consideration. She had already paid her summer visit to her future mother-in-law, and she did not recall that time with much delight—for the mountain estate of the Arer was dreary, and her future mother-in-law a stern woman.

Zista liked Aramut's brother well enough—for he was noble, gallant, and kind, in truth far more handsome and splendid than the king's architect with his gray beard and narrow, sharp mouth.

So she would marry Araton and become a princess of the House of Arer. She could be content with that fate—if only Jochaan had not existed!

Zista impatiently jabbed her elbow into the chest of her living pillow, the wolfhound Sperr.

But he, long accustomed to rough handling since youth, merely wagged his tail and rumbled contentedly, unwilling to let any discord disturb the peaceful idyll his little mistress seemed determined to interrupt. Zista, annoyed at Sperr's indifference, added a light punch with her fist, so that her loyal playmate finally realized she was in earnest—yet, still resolute in his good-natured patience, bore his mistress's incomprehensible mood in silence.

He only rolled his pale yellow eyes with feigned guilt and laid his mighty predator's head between his paws with a deep sigh.

The mountainous waves of the world-sea—muddy, churned from the furious current that circled the globe and stirred its deepest depths—rose and fell in endless rhythm, bearing tangles of seaweed and splintered wood on their foaming, steep crests.

Far out at the cape, where the world of the Abessian Islands ended and the swirling, treacherous sea rushed eastward with the glassy sea and storm-driven clouds in eerie speed, the waters broke in towering columns against the smooth sandstone cliffs.

The roar of the colossal surf reached the girl's ears like the endless rumble of distant thunder.

No ship dared to sail around that point; it would be swept away without hope of return—carried off to where no one came back, where the small white sun rose and the vast burning glassy sea—the sea of crystal mingled with fire—sank below the horizon. And it would be carried away… where?

Jochaan had often said with a smile that, under certain circumstances, such a ship might indeed return—but from the other side, from the west, where the glassy sea rose five times above the horizon during day and night. Yet, he added, this was so improbable as to be nearly impossible. It was far more likely, he said, that the ship would shatter upon some cliff—or be cast upon the coast of his own homeland—for he himself had once tried it, though not entirely of his own will, when he departed from Tihuanaku. The little Zista had indeed saved his life, he said, but in doing so had robbed him of a great scientific discovery, one that could never be regained—unless he tried again by sailing eastward.

How wonderfully the man could laugh when he spoke so! As though his life itself were worth less to him than the mysterious "scientific gain" of which he spoke.

Zista, for lack of Jochaan himself, wrapped her arms around the shaggy neck of her Sperr—who, in his noble dog's heart, had long forgotten her earlier roughness. Yet her embrace was so fierce that for a few moments he could hardly breathe and let out a gurgling protest against such excessive affection—especially since it was clear the affection was not truly meant for him.

People sometimes said Jochaan was mad—that the whirlpool currents of the sea had robbed him of his senses.

Zista did not know whether they were right; nor did she care what others said. She did not believe it—and she loved him nonetheless, with all the animal heat of her simple, burning heart. She loved this mighty man so fiercely that at times she no longer knew whether what she felt was love—or hate.

"Wait—wait!" she gasped, tugging at Sperr's ears so hard that he gave a low yelp.

Then she lay still again, gazing out over the roaring sea and listening to the distant thunder of the surf at the headland, half veiled from sight by the thick streaming rain.

There on those rocks, high above the rushing ocean current, Jochaan often stood day after day, casting strange, colored cork pieces from woven sacks into the sea. The queen had given him slaves whose task was to boil red-dyed resin in kettles and soak the corks in it until they were fully saturated with color.

Why did he do that? Everyone thought it madness—this pointless game with red cork pieces that, the instant he threw them in, sped away eastward on the swift current.

She had once asked him.

"Little beautiful Zista," he had said, "I want to see whether the Earth is as round as your little dark head, and whether the sea flows over it as quickly as the tears down your smooth cheeks when I forget to stroke them. And if those cork pieces come back from the west—though now they rush eastward with the wind's own speed—then I shall kiss you full on the mouth, for that will be a feast day for me… provided the gracious princess allows such a thing to a poor slave. Until then, you must wait."

"You will truly do it?" she had asked mistrustfully, for she was serious about that kiss.

"I'll kiss you then as often as you like," Jochaan answered, turning his eyes away from her.

Ah! He could jest so lightly—well knowing that the corks would never return. How could they? They floated eastward—how could they ever come again from the west?

"It's not impossible," Jochaan had said in reply to her question. "As possible as a ship's return—for even in my homeland of Tihuanaku, far, far from here, the sea flows in a fierce current past the shore, and I believe it is the same sea as this. It follows, it seems to me, the irresistible pull of the glassy sea beyond the clouds, and on its course it must also pass by the Abessian Islands—otherwise it would be unthinkable that I should have landed here in my little canoe. Therefore, I suppose one might reach Tihuanaku again, if one dared to sail on eastward."

All this Zista had not understood—her mind was not equal to it—but a secret, mysterious hope had taken root in her heart: that one day the little cork pieces would come drifting from the west, one after another like small ducks, red as her young mouth—and that each one would mean… oh, it was too foolish to hope for such a miracle!

She had asked the spiritual adviser of the royal family, the high priest Nephat, whether what Jochaan claimed and hoped was possible—though she had not told him what Jochaan had promised her if it came true, for she could hardly confess to the priest that she longed to be kissed by her brother's slave!

But Nephat was not a fool. He guessed what was at play; a young girl was as transparent as glass when she was in love—and none knew better how to read a woman's heart than the idol-priest of the holy dragon.

No, he said, such a thing was not possible. However, if she wished to do Jochaan a kindness—and he was, after all, a man who deserved it if the princess were kindly disposed toward him—then she should take a few of the colored cork pieces and cast them westward into a sheltered cove where they would not be swept away. There she could bring the foreign scholar and show him the "miracle." Then, he added slyly, the man would surely do whatever she desired.

But she must not tell the king or queen anything of it, even though the deception was, in truth, harmless and without evil consequence. By chance, as Nephat spoke these words, Zista had lifted her head—and saw the wicked gleam in the priest's black eyes. That warned her. The thought came to her that this "harmless deception" might be a trap meant for Jochaan.

She also knew that Nephat's early friendship toward Jochaan had long since turned into bitter enmity, ever since the foreign scholar's growing influence at Tutmon's court began to overshadow the priesthood of Tulma.

No—she would not betray Jochaan!

She could not have endured the gaze of his wonderful, clear eyes, which shone like two stars through all her dreams.

Lost in thought, the brown girl blinked through the stone archway of her grotto into the misty distance.

Below her, the waves beat more and more weakly against the sharp, smooth sandstone cliffs, drawing back from the shore with startling speed—like terrible, savage beasts crouching for the fatal spring. The rock mass in which her grotto lay quivered beneath a mighty shock of the earth, so that Zista, though long accustomed from childhood to such fierce outbursts of wild nature, sprang up in alarm and stepped to the mouth of her cave.

Sperr gave a mournful howl and looked up at his little mistress with pleading eyes, as though to warn her of something ominous approaching behind the mist and clouds.

Straining her gaze, the brown child peered over the sea. It seemed to her that out there a towering dark mass was moving swiftly through rain and fog, rolling closer with terrible speed. Zista knew at once what it was!

The treacherous sea was driving a tidal wave before it—as it had done many times before. She did not know that the eruption of an undersea volcano had caused this phenomenon, that the steam explosion of water reaching the molten heart of the earth had heaved up this wall of water—but she knew instantly that she must climb to the heights, where the flood could not follow her.

She cast one quick, measuring glance at the onrushing giant wave—then the girl climbed in swift, sure haste up the steep rocks with her four-legged companion.

She had done this often before under similar circumstances; her seaside grotto always demanded such caution. She clung with her small brown hand to Sperr's thick fur and let herself be pulled upward. That was what Sperr was for—and he did it gladly.

Several times Zista wanted to stop, thinking they were high enough already, but the dog knew better and tugged on without pause, so that she followed, half-annoyed, half-laughing.

At last, high above, the king's sister stretched herself out on a ledge of rock and let the warm, heavy drops of tropical rain beat and stream comfortably over her shining limbs.

Below, the first wave rolled in with majestic slowness, covering her grotto in a single rush and licking far up the slope of the mountain where the girl lay laughing at the outwitted powers of nature at her feet. With a thunderous roar the flood broke and fell back.

Then came the second wave—greater and more terrible than the first—but even that could not reach the child on her safe height. Powerless, it sank back, dragging with it shattered rocks and torn-up trees in a wild whirlpool down into the depths.

After a short pause, a third wave followed—small compared with its sisters—and retreated meekly to its bed.

Curiously, Zista peered toward Jochaan's rocky headland.

There, at the promontory, the second wave had only just struck, crashing down upon the towering spire of the foreign builder's cliff with a thunderous roar.

Zista rejoiced at the sight—for she knew Jochaan was far away, high on the sacred mountain amid hard ice and barren rock, safe from the fury of the sea. Was the danger now over?

She chose to wait a little longer before descending to her grotto, for the sea was not to be trusted.

Unfortunately, the sun just then darkened as the glassy sea passed before the cloud-veiled daylight. The shore sank into total darkness, for the fire-glow of the volcanoes was hidden by the island's rim of mountains.

So the girl had to wait until the darkness passed again—which, as she knew, would not be long. She could easily fill the time thinking of Jochaan!

She stroked the wet fur of her dog and thought of the king's builder—of the little cork pieces that would never come drifting from the west—and of the tempting suggestion of Nephat: to deceive Jochaan.

In the darkness, the idea of that harmless deception lost much of its sting.

Perhaps she would deceive him after all!

Then he would have to keep his promise—he would have to kiss her on the mouth as many times as she desired. That would be hard work for him, since she desired no modest number of kisses; and though she could not think in numbers, she knew well enough that the task would take a very long time to finish.

Afterward she would laugh at him—for a poor, foolish girl had outwitted the great, wise counselor of her brother! In love and in war, after all, any means was fair and permissible, so long as it led to victory.

But Jochaan had marked each of his cork pieces with a branding iron—an emblem known only to him. He always carried the metal stamp with him and showed it to no one; perhaps even he suspected that someone might play him a trick, especially since people laughed at his strange, purposeless pastime and sometimes teased him for it.

That she did not know the mark was unfortunate. The foreigner was not so foolish!

If only I knew the mark! thought Zista. But Jochaan always branded the corks before putting them into the sack he carried down to the sea, and he never let anyone else bear it. The trick, then, was not as simple as the clever Nephat had imagined. She would have to wait for her kisses until she was old and ugly, like the old women of Tulma who sat on their thresholds grinning at passers-by. Then Jochaan would certainly take care not to kiss her—even if twice as many corks floated back as he had cast into the eastern sea.

The rainy season was nearly over. Already there were whole hours in the day when it stayed dry outside, and the sun and the glassy sea shone more brightly through the veils of cloud.

Soon she would have to follow Araton to his lonely mountain estate—and then all would be over with Jochaan and that narrow, firm mouth of his, which he always kept so tightly closed, as if to hold back both his words and the kind-hearted mockery he always had ready—for her, for old Galmon, for the fat merchants of Tulma, but most of all for the priests and their two-storied temple of the sacred dragon, and for the folly of sacrificing to any gods but the one great Spirit who ruled the world by His unchanging laws.

Once she had asked him whether, in his own homeland of Tihuanaku, they too offered human sacrifices to idols. It was after he had been summoned to the king to explain a lifting machine he had designed for the northern fortresses—an invention for which the king was to grant the funds.

A shadow passed over Jochaan's powerful features.

"Yes, alas, little Zista," he said quietly, looking past her into the distance. "That is precisely why I am here, on your brother's islands. I quarreled over such things with a good king—too weak, however, to protect me from the wrath of the priests. So I sailed away to escape the death that would surely have been mine had I not recanted. And I was foolish enough not to recant. And now I am here among you—and can never return."

He added the last words with a pained smile.

Zista lay beneath the dark, racing clouds of her islands, watching whenever a flash of lightning lit the world for a heartbeat, peering out toward the sea.

Even at the cape the great tidal wave had subsided, and the surf once again foamed in its old familiar rhythm against the outermost bastion of firm land—the last refuge of life left to humankind between the mountain-high glaciers and the towering ring-tides, under the rule of that near-Earth moon, the glassy sea.

"Look, Sperr! It's getting light again!" laughed the girl, springing up from her rocky perch. "Now we'll see what the water has done to our grotto."

She tucked the dripping panther-skin under her arm and climbed back down the cliffs, cautious and mistrustful, glancing seaward to see whether the low returning waves appeared in the distance—those treacherous after-surges that sometimes rolled in before the sea truly ebbed. Such waves could be deadlier than the first, because people thought the danger past and paid less heed.

Year after year, the sea claimed its victims among those who went down too soon, too trustingly, to the shore.

Everything seemed safe now. The rocky ground trembled only slightly, with faint quivers and jolts; her gaze could reach farther across the sea, for the rain had eased and driven the veil of clouds farther into the distance.

Like a cat, the slender girl slipped around the saltwater-soaked cliffs, climbing deftly and surely from rock to rock, and stepped—wide-eyed with curiosity—into her grotto.

In some places, murky puddles of bitter seawater still stood upon the floor where the flood-wave had left them. Seaweed and tang hung from the walls, and on the ground lay brown, tattered jellyfish that had missed their return to their wet element.

Her eyes wandered searchingly through the small chamber. Not even a pretty shell or a fat crab had been left behind! And she had so hoped for such a prize, as the sea had often gifted her before.

This time, however—nothing.

Suddenly Zista pressed both hands to her small breast and held her breath. Her heart seemed to stop—at least for one beat—then began to pound wildly against its smooth walls, as though it meant to leap straight out.

There, upon the dull puddle of water, something red was floating!

No—it was faded red, as if it had lain long in the saltwater and been thoroughly bleached. Quite still and merrily it drifted upon the faint breeze that whispered through the grotto. It floated, scarcely touching the surface of the pool, like a tiny ball, like a cheerful little duckling—like a ball of… cork!

Reverently the king's sister followed the voyage of that red marvel. Tears burst from her eyes, yet she did not dare to bend down to examine the bit of colored bark, to see whether it bore the brand mark of Jochaan.

Slowly, on tiptoe, Zista crept toward the red thing, as though even the sound of her bare feet might drive it away.

She bent down, lifted it carefully between thumb and forefinger, and searched breathlessly for Jochaan's seal. But the foolish tears kept her from seeing!

At last, however, she recognized it.

Faded, battered, and rubbed away though it was, the brand mark of Jochaan was still clearly visible—a small circle deeply pressed into the resin-soaked cork, which had made its long journey around the Earth—who knew how many times—only to come, at last, to rest in the grotto of the loving girl, to remind her of a promise Jochaan had once made, never dreaming he might have to keep it.

Zista now held in her hand the tangible proof of the foreign builder's claim—that the world was round.

But the roundness of the Earth meant nothing at all to Zista. She could not even imagine why it must be round, simply because a little red cork had come back from the west when it had been thrown into the sea in the east.

To her, the cork meant far more than such knowledge, which she gladly left to others. To her it was joy—triumph—fulfillment itself!

"Wait, Jochaan! Wait!" she cried aloud into the cavern, as if the learned man were sitting there against the wall, waiting for the little king's sister like a love-struck tomcat waiting for his mate.

How many times Zista kissed the cork, no record tells — but it happened very often, so often that Sperr turned away in embarrassment and began licking his muzzle.

When the girl began to spin around herself like a brown, whirling top, splashing up the puddles, the dog, casting her a sidelong, uneasy glance, vacated the field and sat down outside the cave to wait. His ears twitched in discomfort, back and forth, up and down, for the king's sister was singing a jubilant melody to accompany her dance — a tune that no dog's ears could endure. In agony, Sperr stretched his mighty predator's head toward the sky, his snout went strangely round, and finally Sperr began to sing along — not as beautifully as Zista, to be sure, but much louder.

Then she shook her head and began to laugh, then to cry, then to laugh again.

At last, she tucked the miraculous cork into her hip cloth, carefully tying it so that her precious find would not be lost, and—without further ceremony—mounted astride the broad back of her dog.

"We ride home, Sperr!" she commanded, giving him a friendly pat on the head.

Sperr trotted off, slowly and cautiously, for his mistress was not quite as light as she looked, and the path—quite apart from its constant heaving underfoot—was by no means good.

Still, Sperr was used to being treated like a proper dog, and besides—he carried the child gladly.

Now even the rain had almost completely stopped.

Zista laughed. Winter was already stirring, and the days of the sun could not be far away. Perhaps this time it might even be possible to see the shining disk itself! Her brother and the queen had told her that shortly before the great earthquake they had been lucky enough to see the white, dazzling orb—if only for a few seconds. So the time of clouds and ceaseless rain could not last much longer, thought the girl, as she rode leisurely along on the back of her four-legged companion, the wet panther skin draped about her shoulders.

Soon Araton would have to return from the Holy Mountain, where he and Jochaan were building cave dwellings in the rock!

And when he returned, the time would come — she would have to marry him, as her brother had decreed. There was nothing to be done about it.

But was it really to be so soon?

Zista felt no inner rebellion against the king's command. The girls of the Abessian Islands were accustomed to having their husbands assigned to them and were, in general, content with that.

But there was one thing the king's sister knew for certain — and this she would not, under any circumstances, allow to be taken from her.

Beforehand, Jochaan must fulfill his promise!

Oh, she would not make it too difficult for him to do so — on the contrary, she would make it easy, very easy, for him to keep his word. Perhaps he would even…? Then suddenly she thought of the queen. Zista's face grew hard and spiteful.

The queen belonged to her brother! What had Jochaan to do with the queen — and the queen with Jochaan? The queen was married and bound to her husband.

She herself, the little king's sister, was still free and could do as she pleased. She still had the right to love whomever she wished!

And how much she loved Jochaan!

If only he were of royal blood, so that she could marry him!

But he was only a servant, a poor slave of the king — and in his American homeland he had also been merely a scholar in the service of another king, as he himself had told her, though everyone would have believed him if he had called himself a king! Even in Tihuanaku he had been only a master builder, who had erected mighty step-pyramids in honor of the deity, who had built dams against the floodwaters that rushed down from the mountains and destroyed the harvest, or against the waves that also there, in times of volcanic spring tides, came in from the sea. He had built ships that could not capsize in heavy seas, because they bore heavy copper in their keels — ships that now secured her brother's naval supremacy in the north against the white nomads.

Deep within her, the girl carried the conviction that Jochaan was greater than all kings and rulers on earth — indeed, that he alone was worthy of a crown, for he was wiser and grander than the princes whom he served and whose slave he was. Yet Zista did not know how she could ever express such feelings if her brother were to confront her.

Tradition and upbringing made any union with Jochaan impossible — of that she was perfectly aware. She had not yet resolved to defy this law, but she at least wished to taste the sweetness of a brief love before she went to Araton, to his lonely mountain estate — to the homeland of Queen Aramut.

The queen, too, loved Jochaan.

Who did not love him, once they had seen and heard him — he who was so simple and earnest in manner, so infinitely self-possessed and noble in bearing, who never puffed himself up or let his eyes play coquettishly when a woman was near?

And how could he have used his eyes, if he had wished!

There were no other eyes like his in all the island realm — none like Jochaan's.

But what if he loved the queen as well?

That was possible, after all — for the queen was young and comely, though not so beautiful, nor so radiantly brown, as the little king's sister. At that thought, Zista began to shiver, though it was not the first time it had come to her.

Jochaan had a mastery over himself such as few men possessed. He knew he was a stranger among a foreign people, and that he had no right to the love of royal women.

How often had Zista, hidden in some shadowy corner of King Tutmon's palace, watched the scholar and the queen together — learning, writing, and calculating side by side, bending over the wax tablets and tracing strange signs with their styluses into the soft surface.

Never had the girl caught so much as a single treacherous glance from Jochaan.

Only once had the queen looked after the king's builder as he departed.

Zista had never forgotten that look.

It had held many things — deep respect, admiration, reverence — but also love, an infinite love for a great spirit, a king among spirits, and therefore irresistible.

Sperr trotted tirelessly over hill and valley, panting, his red tongue hanging from his mouth like a flame. Zista did not notice; she was too absorbed in her friendly and unfriendly thoughts alike, and was only surprised when the faithful dog, flanks heaving, stopped before the gate of the royal palace.

"What? Sperr? We're already home?" she cried in astonishment, sighing as she slid down from the back of her friend.

"Oh, you poor beast! I didn't give you a single rest! Why didn't you say something?"

Sperr panted and rolled his yellow eyes with humble devotion, as if to say that it was an honor to catch lung fever in the service of Eve and all her kind.

He crawled at once into his kennel and drained the bowl of water that stood there.

Zista snapped her fingers carelessly, called to the watchman to feed Sperr, and slipped past Galmon's bear-like bulk into the house.

Galmon laughed — though he had taken a jab to the ribs — full of joy as he watched the little beauty hurry off, the one who in the royal court usually replaced the missing sun, despite her brown skin.

Zista turned once more in the dark antechamber and waved to the old man.

“Are you going riding?” she asked.

Galmon nodded, self-important.

Then the girl came back and stood in front of him.

“Where are you going to ride?” she demanded.

“I won’t tell, little princess,” replied the soldier with a sly wink. At that very moment, he felt a warm sting on his cheek — and the king’s sister had vanished into the house!

The child has boxed my ears! thought Galmon, half annoyed, half amused. Does she already suspect that I’m riding to Araton, to bring him for the wedding?

The old man looked up at the sky. The weather had noticeably improved — and it was high time!

Only the ground beneath his feet seemed to have fallen into a constant trembling, worse instead of better.

The commander of the royal guard, however, had taken precautions so that a catastrophe like the one a few months ago would, by human judgment, not happen again.

The king’s house was now braced in all directions of the compass with triple and quadruple hemp ropes, so that, in Galmon’s opinion, it could just as well be turned upside down without coming apart at the seams.

The old general mounted a waiting horse to ride to Jochaan on the Holy Mountain.

He was to deliver to Araton the command that he must soon come to Tulma, where the king awaited him.

Galmon knew, besides, that this also meant arranging the marriage of little Zista.

But the wedding — even that of the king's own sister — was not a particularly great event on the Abessian Islands.

The reason went deeper.

Nephat had been repeatedly with the king, and must have worked on him with truth and lies alike — as he knew masterfully how to do, since it was, after all, his profession.

The priest had succeeded in making the king suspicious of Jochaan.

The high priest had applied the lever at the king's weakest point: the friendship between Prince Araton and the servant Jochaan.

Araton came, like his lord and brother-in-law, from an ancient and respected lineage.

While Tutmon's house had long dwelt on the Abessian Islands, the Arers had, many generations ago, immigrated from the icy North.

Tradition told that, at first, there had been murder and slaughter, but that after years of bitter enmity, the two peoples had, of necessity, finally come to terms.

Soon after, they had intermarried and buried the old hatred.

Thus Tutmon, some years before, had married Aramut of the House of Arer, and now Araton was to wed the king's sister — so that the bond uniting the two noblest families of the land might be made still stronger.

The royal crown, however, could only be worn by men of the lineage of the Tutmons; only after the extinction of this line would the House of Arer have a claim to succession. Both houses were already near extinction. War, disease, and misfortune had done their part; now Tutmon hoped that Aramut would bear him an heir to the throne. So far, this hope had not been fulfilled.

If Tutmon remained childless, it was possible that Araton's sons would one day come to rule.

Now Nephat had driven an arrow into the king's flesh — metaphorically speaking — by suggesting that Araton's close association with the foreign builder might already be a danger to the stability of the Tutmon dynasty. Jochaan, he warned, was teaching Araton all his arts so that a man of

royal blood might gain in intellectual power and — who knows when — one day use that knowledge for his own ends.

Surely not today or tomorrow, for Araton was an honorable man and had no thought of reaching for the crown of the land. But who could ever know? Especially if Jochaan knew how to awaken his ambition. Having a king as a personal friend must be of no small advantage to the slave Jochaan. Perhaps Jochaan meant no harm — yet the outcome of such a friendship between two unusually intelligent men might one day bring trouble to the royal house of Tutmon. It would be wiser to act in time, before that happened.

It was also to be suspected, Nephat suggested, that the foreign scholar might not even be sincere in his friendship with Araton; otherwise he would show more restraint — particularly toward Zista, the king's sister. Even if it was humanly understandable that the king's architect might feel gratitude and love for the girl who had once saved his life — for Jochaan too was an honorable man — still…

"That Nephat is an outright scoundrel!" declared Galmon, who had been present at this discussion, as he now urged his pacing horse through the gate of the royal court.

The judgment was a bit harsh, not entirely fair, but it reflected the old soldier's attitude toward the idol priest.

That the cunning cleric Nephat feared the possible rise of the ancient House of Arer and thought he was acting in defense of the reigning royal house — this Galmon refused to see, deliberately, though he might have known it, had he been honest with himself.

But since there is no cure for either love or hatred, Galmon remained firm in his conviction that Nephat was, indeed, an outright scoundrel.

Behind the commander rode several dark-skinned soldiers on shaggy mounts, their brutalized faces hanging dull and expressionless.

On the shifting, trembling ground they let their horses pick their own way, for the animals could find the path through fog and cloud better than riders who tried to guide them.

This military escort on the march to the Holy Mountain was by no means unnecessary, for the tropical island refuge of pre-diluvian times also gave shelter to beasts — both wild and harmless — seeking their last refuge from northern frost and southern tidal floods. Some of these creatures no lone man armed with simple stone weapons could hope to withstand. Especially along the sheltered eastern slope of the Holy Mountain lay the favored grazing grounds of

the ancient beasts, which there found food in plenty and protection from the mighty storms that ceaselessly swept the islands.

The last rider left the courtyard just as the king and Nephat stepped out of the house.

That rider turned in the saddle and bent his woolly head toward the high priest. Nephat greeted him with his eyes — imperceptible to the king, yet clearly understood by the guardsman.

Nephat kept paid informants within the king's bodyguard.

Still, even the cunning priest did not suspect that one can sometimes miscalculate with the souls of slaves — when the spirit of a stronger man has already taken possession of them.

Tutmon was ill.

He suffered from the malady that had long taken hold in Tulma and which the priesthood's medicine had so far been unable to master — painful, swollen glands. The ruler of the Abessian Islands wore his throat thickly bandaged and walked with a listless, bent gait. One could see how he suffered and that his temper was far from good.

"The filthy, poisonous water is to blame," the king snarled. "It is bitter as wormwood and has brought this dreadful disease upon us. If we had carried the water-pipe from the mountains as Jochaan advised before he left, none of this would have happened and we and the people would have remained healthy. But you advised me against it, because the work would swallow up unnecessary money and besides was too difficult. You were of the opinion that Tulma had excellent water and that bringing a new source was unnecessary."

"The water in Tulma was good when Jochaan went to the Holy Mountain," replied the high priest, contrite and in a modest tone. "Only since the outbreak of the pestilence and the dreadful earthquake has it become bitter. I could not know that; the gods gave me no sign, otherwise I would not have dissuaded you, lord."

"But Jochaan knew it — or at least feared it would come to this!" Tutmon retorted angrily. "Why do you always counsel me against whatever that man says? You must get used to the fact that he is wiser than all of us put together. Even last winter, when the fire-spouting mountain Kisau collapsed and the springs in the southern districts ran dry or turned bitter, he warned us that the same might happen to the city of Tulma because it lies so near the Peri. Now his prophecy has come true — literally! The Peri has done its work, and the city has

poisoned water. If we only had the new conduit from the healthy springs of the rocky mountains, this suffering would not have come upon us."

Nephat was wise enough to remain silent.

In that mood it would be unwise to argue with the hot-tempered soldier. Besides, to his not small annoyance, he realized that Jochaan had indeed been right. Even in his far-off homeland on the Peruvian high plain, as he had said, he had experienced similar things and drawn lessons from them. The foreigner had warned time and again, but no one had believed him.

"If you command it, lord, I will set all the temple slaves and the citizens of Tulma to work so that the water-pipe can be completed," Nephat said after a while in a submissive tone appropriate to his position. "There are only two more earth cuttings to dig, and then the healthy clear water from the rock spring at the foot of the Holy Mountain will flow to the city. I believe we can make up what was neglected, and the illness will quickly improve. Unfortunately, Jochaan has taken your slaves up to the Holy Mountain, lord. We could use them well as laborers here now. Up there they will surely not be as needed as here."

"Yes, it was a mad folly that I allowed it," the king answered, angry at himself. "I really feel like recalling them all!"

A gleam of schadenfreude passed over Nephat's clever face, but his expression immediately became grave. "If it is your will, lord, then I, too, would advise that," he replied submissively. "You have, in any case, sufficient reason for such an order, and Jochaan, as I know him, will be reasonable enough to understand it. If even his king and benefactor is sick because he must drink poisoned water, he can do without the slaves for a short time, especially since the work on the Holy Mountain does not seem to be of very great importance."

"It is an outright folly!" Tutmon burst out. "You may well call it by its name, Nephat. It is madness and waste, what Jochaan is doing up there. I wish I had never permitted it, but Araton and the queen…"

The High Priest raised his hand soothingly.

"Permit me to say again, my lord: that is no wonder. Araton lies under the spell of that extraordinary man and may have unlearned how to judge independently and rightly. Your wife, the queen, too, is convinced that everything Jochaan does is good and proper. His exceptional gifts of mind, which I acknowledge without envy, indeed justify such a belief. But to men of clear vision — such as yourself, lord — has been given the faculty to distinguish between madness and reason. You, above all, must be capable of this, for you know Jochaan as no other in the realm does, and you know how great his

services to you have been. You will recognize at once when his work ceases to serve you rightly."

The king squinted distrustfully with his sound eye at the smooth, well-groomed face of his spiritual adviser; for the priest's last flattery suddenly reminded him of Jochaan's amused smile when the latter had once witnessed a similar gracious remark from Nephat. That smile of the foreign master-builder had struck the soldier-king so strongly that afterward he had asked Jochaan what he had meant by it.

"My dear lord," the builder had replied, "the flattering estimate of your intellect by the High Priest Nephat reminded me of an incident in my homeland far to the west, beyond the roaring sea. I thought of it, and therefore I smiled. There too a king loved me, because I was useful to him and because he—perhaps—favored me as a man. But a word such as Nephat just now spoke to you, pleasant to hear as the sweet music of a harp, cost me that king's favor; for I, in contrast, was of the opinion that the king acted wrongly and unwisely, and I was foolish enough to tell him so openly. That is why I smiled, lord, when I heard Nephat: because I know men and kings, and because I know that your favor toward your servant Jochaan may one day change when he tells you that you act wrongly, while Nephat tells you that you act wisely and rightly. I would wish that you remember my words when that time comes, as it once befell me in my own land."

Now Tutmon thought of Jochaan's words.

But being sick and in ill humor, he drove the unwelcome thought away.

Nevertheless, he did not at once act on the priest's proposal to recall the slaves from the Holy Mountain, but rather seized upon the malicious hint that Nephat had once made concerning Jochaan and the king's sister Zista.

"What is it with my sister and Jochaan?" he asked curtly and sharply.

The High Priest of the Sacred Beast lifted his shoulders lightly, as though he did not know what to say.

"It sprang more from an unfounded concern, lord, than from any observed fact," he answered slowly and cautiously, as though he hesitated to tell the king an unpleasant truth. "You know, O king, that I watch with jealous care over the honor and welfare of the house of Tutmon. It cannot be indifferent to me if a foreigner of low birth, however gifted, should have the fortune—whether wittingly or unwittingly—to win the affection of a princess of your noble house. It is natural that Jochaan should be the protégée and favorite of your highborn sister, and it speaks of royal magnanimity that Zista would wish to preserve the life of the man she saved. I am convinced she would have done the same for a

drowning animal, even a dog. All that is human and understandable. It is also Jochaan's duty to be grateful and to love his rescuer. Yet, to my mind, there is a difference between love—and love."

The king waved his hand dismissively. Then he broke into an exasperated laugh.

"You're not telling me anything unpleasant, Nephat," he said with a sigh, thinking of his queen and the scholar. If a suspicion had ever stirred in his heart, it referred to the familiar relationship between Aramut and Jochaan, not to anything between Zista and the poor builder of the Holy Mountain.

"That pleases me, lord," the priest said, abashed, for he had expected a different effect from his words and was puzzling over why the king might take his hints so well.

"I have but one eye," the king went on, smiling. "But with the one I have I can see very well. As to little Zista, you may be reassured, Nephat. I too am convinced that Jochaan loves her, and if I were Jochaan and not her brother, I would also fall for that little devil like a strutting tom—so be it. But rest assured: this Jochaan loves her only as a servant may love his mistress, no more and no less. And as for Zista herself—she is a childish girl; let her love him for all I care, what do I know? It is not important. Every young girl at some time in her life, or more often depending on temperament, indulges in such fancies for an older, distinguished man. This worry will soon be resolved, my Nephat, for Zista will shortly marry Prince Araton, who is a friend of the scholar. The gulf will therefore be greater rather than smaller. At Araton's side the little one, as I know her, will soon have forgotten her affection for the poor builder. But I thank you for your worries about pains I do not have. I would much rather that you restored my poisoned glands to health, or by your prayers drove off the enemies from the northern frontier, where they will soon mass in numbers because they cannot breathe the thin, icy air and must come into our lands to live—unless we manage to cut them down. Or that you produced the missing harvest that has been destroyed for whole days' journey by the poisonous ash-cloud from the fire-mountain Peri and its small brother. The news from the realm is downright dismal. I should help and cannot, for distress has come here to Tulma as well, where it had not been known since the memory of man—where the citizens grew fat and wealthy and the ship-masters quite literally did not know where to fling their riches. Think how to meet the coming shortage that will arrive with the beginning of winter, with the time of the sun, which we cannot prevent."

Nephat at once, with the mental agility of a courtier, addressed his sovereign's concerns. He knew the situation was serious, though he did not believe in the collapse the sick king, in his gloomy mood, seemed to foresee.

"To combat and cure the glandular disease is not within my power, though I am not inexperienced in treating some illnesses," he replied with dignity. "You know, lord, that I daily and hourly bid the gods to grant health to you and your house. I also hope this painful pestilence will soon die out once the canal is finished that will bring healthy water from the mountains to Tulma. Your strong arm will drive off the enemy on the northern border, and the cold will help you, as it has in recent years. What can Nephat do, who is only a simple priest and not a mighty hero like you? Even the gods could not do more than you have done in past years. And regarding the coming shortage, I have a proposal that will, I hope, find your approval, however odd it may at first sound. The concern about how to meet a shortage has troubled me for some time. You must seek to prevent the merchants from arbitrarily raising food prices because of scarcity. You must restrain the lords a little for the time of need, for they have had good years under your generous rule and can, in this time of want, show whether they love you and the people. Moreover, the holy dragon will assist you in this."

Tutmon looked at his high priest as if doubting his common sense.

"And what good will the sacred dragon be against the famine, Nephat?" the king asked irritably. "I can think of one counsel, though. He will not live long, I saw him recently—his head was frightfully mauled. We could slaughter him and feed the people. If that's what you mean, then there is some sense in your proposal. The dragon will help us against the famine!"

The king burst into a good-natured laugh. The high priest did not laugh at his master's remark; he continued in deep seriousness.

"He is not to help us against the famine, lord, but he can help against the rise in prices, which is almost as dire, because for the penniless populace inflation and famine are the same thing. You have only to command, lord, and the inflation will not occur."

"Do not speak in riddles, priest!" the king snapped in a bad temper. "I am not in the mood to be mocked, not even by you. You may preach to the foolish people that the dragon helps against price-rises, but spare me! Do not spoil the good impression your flattery made by implying that I am a fool who believes in the power of a half-dead beast that my own hand subdued."

"I cannot change my view of your extraordinary intellect, dear lord. In this one point I would even refuse to obey an order," the high priest said, inclining his narrow, clever head humbly. "You know, lord, that I daily and hourly entreat the gods for your and your house's health. I hope also that this painful pestilence will soon die out once the canal bringing healthy mountain water to Tulma is completed. Your strong arm will drive off the enemy at the northern border, and the frost will help you as in former years. What is to be

Nephat's doing—he is only a simple priest, not a mighty hero like you? Even the gods could not do more than you have in the past. And regarding the coming price-rise, I have a proposal which I hope will meet your approval, however strange it may at first sound. The worry of how to meet a price-rise has been on my mind for some time. You must prevent merchants from arbitrarily hiking food prices when supplies are scarce. You must place some restraint on the lords for the time of need, for they have enjoyed good years under your generous rule and should now, in time of want, show whether they love you and the people. Moreover, the holy dragon will assist you in this."

The priest drew a piece of copper from his pocket and handed it to the king, who examined the stamp carefully. On the face of it was the raised image of an aquatic saurian—a dragon with a tail banded three times.

The king returned the stamp to his high priest with a doubtful face.

"What is this piece of copper with the image of the beast?" he asked, shaking his head.

"Jochaan put me on to the idea," Nephat smiled. "Jochaan brands his little cork bits—which in his madness he throws into the raging sea and believes will return—with a copper stamp so he can recognize them if they do come back. You, however, shall brand the merchants who apply to trade in your realm with the mark of the holy dragon on their brow or in their hand, so that no one may trade except the bearer of the beast's mark on brow or hand. Be certain, lord, not everyone will submit to the painful marking. Most will try to avoid it and will trade in defiance of your ban. If they do, their wealth will be forfeited to you, the king, and anyone anxious for cheap food—the poor rabble of Tulma—will praise you for it, because you control price and at least ensure that the little bread there is is sold at low prices. The few merchants who do consent to be branded with the image of the holy dragon you will be able to supervise with ease. Thus, O king, will the wondrous beast that your hand wounded and your will elevated to divine honors help you."

The king looked in surprise into the priest's black, clever eyes. What Nephat had proposed was not foolish, especially since it was obviously to the royal treasury's advantage.

"The beast that came from the sea and which your arm struck will help you," the high priest continued warmly. "Your hand that struck its wound will bring blessing upon your people. It will be my task to convince the people of the god-willed necessity of this measure."

"You yourself are an animal, Nephat!" the king replied with mild horror. "But a dangerous and clever animal, although you did not come from the sea like our water-dragon."

"As you command, lord," answered the high priest, flattered. "I will be an animal that gives the water-dragon, by your hand, the power needed to avert the calamity. The people have been like madmen since the great earthquake. On the squares before the huts men and naked women dance despite sickness and want, instead of working to oppose the distress; wild orgies are the order of the day since the glandular pestilence broke out. People want to enjoy life as long as possible and no longer believe in better days. It is therefore necessary, by spiritual influence, to bring the masses once more under firm control. Such unleashed licentiousness cannot be indifferent to you as the supreme war-leader, for the incursion of the northern peoples threatens to be more dangerous than in past years, and the terrible riders — pestilence, war, inflation, and famine — already ride at your borders."

Tutmon stared fixedly at the ground.

The high priest was probably right. Things did not look good in his realm. What Nephat had said about the four riders at the borders of the Abessian Islands was the truth. They were no longer merely at the borders but already in his land! And all this had to befall him now, when he was ill and the time demanded a whole man! It would not even be possible this year to ride out against the northerners; he would have to leave the leadership in this important war to Prince Araton. Galmon was on his way to the Holy Mountain to fetch him.

The king gasped for air, and his brown face went pale. Nephat threw his arms about his lord's shoulders and supported him.

"Will you not lie down?" he asked anxiously, and the tone of his voice betrayed genuine fear for the life and health of the prince of the Abessian Islands.

"The air of late has grown so dreadfully thin, it seems to me," the sick man groaned. "I can hardly draw breath. That is not only because of my illness, Nephat! The queen thinks that the glassy sea, which sets beside the light of the sun and sinks with fire and fearful menace, tears the air away from the earth so that people can no longer breathe and must die. Jochaan told her it might come to this. Why I do not know, and neither did Jochaan know for certain. But I see that he is right again. This man can look into the distance with the eyes of a seer, and whatever he has said has come to pass, as if he were kin to fate and related to the future. — See, Nephat, how the clouds are tearing! See the crystal sea! It used to be a perfect crescent. Does it not look as if it is now distorted? — Now it is gone. You can no longer see how distorted it was, as if it wanted to burst apart."

"You have a fever, dear lord," said Nephat softly and with pity. "The glassy sea looks as it always has, as it has looked since men have dwelt upon the

earth—snow-white as the ice of the Northlands and round as a millstone. You are mistaken, lord. Nor does Jochaan speak the truth, King! He needlessly frightens your queen when he says the glassy sea draws the air away from the earth. That is again one of the ruinous follies this man proclaims—this incomprehensible scholar who knows so artfully how to weave truth and falsehood together that I begin to doubt whether he is not to be counted among the criminals."

"We must make peace with the beasts with the round, deep eyes, Nephat," replied the king in rising dread.

"Jochaan says they are circular ring-mountains and not the eyes of beasts," sneered the high priest. "Ring-mountains of white ice, like crystal, like glass, like the snow that falls on the holy mountain! If you trust Jochaan so greatly, lord, then the sacrifice you intend to make is needless and in vain. Your faithful Nephat has long advised you to appease the beasts. For indeed they are evil beasts that lash the trembling earth with mighty blows, that drive the clouds restlessly across the sky till it rolls up like a scroll, so that we scarcely know when it is day or when it is night. Beasts that let us dwell in the ghastly alternation of dim light and black darkness and torment and terrify the peoples. But Jochaan is wiser than your loyal priesthood. Your trust has turned from them and gone to the foreign builder, who on the holy mountain digs purposeless holes in the rock on the side facing east, and who stores provisions in ice-caves that were far more needed here in Tulma. Years ago I urged you to sacrifice Jochaan to the gods before he could bring harm. But you would not. Perhaps the powers above now scorn other offerings, since you withheld the stranger from them."

"Yes, yes, I know!" groaned the king in torment. "Yet let three slaves be slaughtered nevertheless, do you hear, Nephat? And all the living spoils from the north—men and beasts—I will at winter's time offer to the gods and to the holy dragon. Every god, every creature by the glassy sea shall have its own blood-sacrifice. Perhaps then we shall have peace upon the earth."

The king collapsed. Nephat held him in his arms and looked anxiously at his lord's pale face.

Soldiers of the bodyguard hurried up and carried their ailing ruler into the hall to Aramut.

Shortly after Nephat's departure Tutmon awoke from his faint. He lay on a couch of bearskins, and Aramut and Zista sat beside him, laying compresses upon the head and neck of their lord.

The queen too was ill, yet she kept herself upright and tended her husband without complaint.

Zista looked fearfully into her brother's ashen face, which in the flickering light of the small clay lamp appeared wasted. She had been sitting in the outer hall upon one of the soldiers' beasts, as she often did when she wished to be alone with her thoughts, and had overheard part of the conversation between the two men. Though she had caught but little, she knew that a grave danger was gathering around Jochaan.

In silence the women sat by the sick king.

Outside the thunderstorm began again after several hours of stillness. Rain beat upon the tight roof of the princes' hall, and the earth quaked without cease—now in light undulations, now trembling with nervous jerks, now in thudding shocks, as though evil underground spirits struck impatiently against the stony crust to break through it.

The thunderous roar of the volcanoes was suddenly heard again, and the women exchanged anxious glances.

The king asked for water.

Aramut handed it to him; he drank greedily, in deep gulps, an unfamiliar pure spring water that was not bitter like the water from the silted well of the city of Tulma.

"What water is this? Where did you get it?" Tutmon asked, pleasantly surprised.

"I had it brought from Jochaan's rock spring," the queen replied softly. "He told me this water would probably remain drinkable the longest, even if the other springs were to dry up or turn bitter. I remembered his words and have ordered that from now on our water be fetched from there, even though the way is long."

"Again Jochaan," Tutmon whispered. "Again him! And what then—what if even that spring fails?" he asked bitterly.

"Jochaan says that then we must melt the glacier ice and drink it, but we must mix in a little lime first so that it does no harm. Even Jochaan cannot perform the impossible. He has no power to keep the water from turning bitter."

The king sank back and looked uneasily up at the swaying ceiling of his house.

"Galmon, Galmon!" he murmured in torment, and a fit of coughing shook the sick ruler's body.

The queen looked at Zista in deep concern.

Zista shook her head, though she guessed what the king meant. She herself had asked the old field commander where he was riding, but had received no answer—so earlier, in the forehall, she had sat astride one of the soldiers' beasts behind the entrance door and overheard the king's conversation with the high priest. She did not know the full meaning of it, but one thing was clear: it was aimed against Jochaan.

"What about Galmon, lord?" asked Aramut.

The king turned away irritably and faced the wall. For a long time he said nothing.

At last, with a grumbling tone from within the bearskins, he spoke:

"I sent him to the holy mountain, to Jochaan—that's all."

"So you mean to have Araton brought back?" asked the queen.

"Yes. I need him, since I am ill. He must depart northward in my stead and man the fortresses against the white men; it is the highest time that this be done. If I were not sick, I would already be in the saddle and riding to the Northlands. But as it is, I must remain here, hard as it is for me. Araton is healthy and strong. He shall ensure the safety of my realm since I cannot do so this time. And when he returns, he shall marry Zista, as I have decreed. I have my reasons for hastening this matter."

The little king's sister twisted her mouth and, unseen by her brother, stuck out her red tongue at him.

She could dare that safely, since Tutmon had his broad back turned to her.

Aramut exhaled. She saw the necessity of it. Jochaan was, therefore, to remain on the holy mountain until his work was completed.

"I want my slaves back as well," the king continued, his voice rough and hoarse. "They have idled long enough up there on useless work. Now they shall finish digging the water conduit to Tulma. The temple's slaves will also be brought in, as well as the citizens of Tulma. I hope we will then soon be finished, and that this misery with the poisoned water will finally end."

"Why did you stop the work?" the queen asked sadly. "The aqueduct could have long been completed. Didn't Jochaan tell you, before he left, that this was the most important task to be done here below?"

"Nephat advised me to stop the work, saying it was pointless," Tutmon replied. "Now he wants to continue it; suddenly he shows great zeal in the matter. Perhaps it is not too late. He needs my slaves from the holy mountain for it, and I have no reason to refuse him, since it concerns the health of the people."

The queen bowed her head.

It all sounded quite reasonable, and Jochaan's work in the mountains did indeed seem purposeless — she admitted that, however reluctantly. The water conduit was, under the present circumstances, far more important than the stone chambers the king's master builder was having carved into the rock.

"Summon me a messenger, Zista," Tutmon ordered curtly.

"Or better yet, tell him to ride immediately after Galmon. Araton shall receive my command to bring back the slaves — all of them, do you hear? All!"

"Should Jochaan be left all alone in the icy wilderness?" the little king's sister ventured timidly.

"Do as I say, and don't concern yourself with matters that are for men," Tutmon snapped irritably. "If you are so anxious for Jochaan, then run up the mountain and keep him company. Perhaps he won't find your presence unwelcome — nor you his."

The king's sister turned pale with fright and pressed a hand to her pounding heart. She wanted to reply, but the queen motioned to her with her hand and smiled.

So Zista left the hall to carry out her brother's command.

"Wait, dear brother!" she thought to herself, the fear already fading. "Your order to run to Jochaan — I shall carry it out, though you meant it in jest. Up there we'll be alone, far from everyone, and I'll bring him the cork he must redeem. But I'll wait until Araton arrives here with the slaves; then I'll be sure to find Jochaan alone. Who will come looking for me then? — What happens afterward? — I don't know. Jochaan will know."

Edmund Kiß

ASCENT

The crystalline moon sank into the immense cone of shadow cast by the Earth, as the light of the sun shone upon it from the far side into the depths of space. Pitch-black darkness crept upward over the cliffs and slopes of the holy mountain high above the city of Tulma.

Like a storm roaring out of the jaws of hell, gust after gust howled over the mounted troop that Galmon was leading toward the newly built cave dwellings on the eastern face of the rocky range. Invisible damp mists and foul fumes from distant volcanoes, spewing fire, swept with dreadful speed around crags and ledges through the night, while afar the red and blue flames of burning mountains flickered faintly.

Wildly and without pause the earth shook — now in short, violent jolts, now in harsh, grinding tremors — kneaded and tortured by the tidal surges of the glassy sea.

Dull and apathetic, the riders leaned with their beasts against protective rock faces turned toward the east. Snow and hail whirled in the buffeting wind around their legs up to the knees, frost clung to their black beards until their noses nearly froze, and their brown, bestial faces burned as if with fire.

The entire mountain swayed ceaselessly beneath the restless shocks, so that one could hardly keep footing, unable to move a step in the darkness without risking a fall into the abyss.

At this relatively sheltered spot the horses were to remain behind, while the rest of the ascent would be made on foot once the glassy moon emerged again from Earth's shadow in bright three-quarter phase, casting its uncertain light upon the path.

Galmon breathed heavily and with effort. The air here above was far thinner than down in Tulma. The earth's satellite — the glassy sea — was, in the final throes before its collapse, doing its full share of tormenting the Earth: with the monstrous power of its gravity, it drew the air piled up along the equatorial bulge into a vast gaseous tide, pulling it upward, where it streamed away beyond the clouds in glowing Geissler-like bands into the void of space.

In vain did the volcanoes all around hurl endless masses of gas into the heavens to replace the lost air; in vain did decomposed water bubble up in vast clouds of steam from the molten depths to replenish what the moon had stolen — for unceasingly the recovered air fled from the uppermost layers of the atmosphere, irretrievably lost into the cosmic emptiness.

The old soldier knew nothing of these causes for the air's thinning in his homeland. He endured the hardships with the stoic calm of a veteran for whom nothing is unexpected, to whom death and danger mean little, and who knows he cannot change the terrors surrounding him.

That Jochaan was mad with his obsession for this mountain became clearer to him than ever; for what sane man would choose such a desolate peak on which to carve living quarters no one would ever inhabit — unless they were as deranged as Jochaan himself?

Here, atop this frozen height buried in perpetual snow, earthquakes and storms joined with thunder and rain, with air so thin it stole the breath and pressure so low it crushed the lungs.

It was a pity about that splendid master-builder with the mocking, powerful eyes — that his reason had become so hopelessly disturbed.

How gladly Galmon would have taken him into the army. As a soldier, Jochaan could have accomplished great things — and the old commander would, with a mixture of kindness and firmness, have cured him of his wild obsessions. Such fearless men he could use in his ranks: men who laughed when others trembled in terror, men who acted when others, despairing, let their hands fall.

Unfortunately, Jochaan was unfit for military service, for when little Zista had performed her rescue work five seasons of clouds ago, she had, in her innocent way, so strangely set his once-strong arms that the bones had grown together crooked and twisted, like large, misshapen lumps beneath the muscle. It was out of the question that he would ever regain the strength to wield shield or stone-axe again.

Still, Jochaan must have had a robust constitution to have survived the tender but utterly untrained nursing of the young princess so well. Galmon chuckled to himself, remembering Zista's embarrassed face when the medicine man of the high priest Nephat had carefully discussed the "surgical skill" of the royal sister, and the injured man's own remark — how good-naturedly he had comforted his little rescuer! He had said she had surpassed Nature itself in the "fashioning" of his arms, and that he was quite content she had not attached them to his back instead, but had left them, luckily, in their proper place.

The riders heard their leader laughing and, seized with superstitious fear, shrank in upon themselves.

Who could laugh amid the darkness of that dreadful lunar eclipse — here, upon the icy mountain heights, doubly eerie — on such a night, when evil spirits were said to wail among the cliffs and trail their reeking clouds of sulfurous vapor behind them?

Suddenly and without warning, the glassy sea — the great crystalline moon — emerged from the darkness and shone like a vast, pale, fiery glow, nearly circular, high above their heads, covering a third of the heavens like a blurred disk of burning smoke. Wisps of cloud and filmy mist fled swiftly before it, half-light and deep shadow chasing one another in wild, ragged flight.

Eerily distorted, heavy with fate, the ghostly radiance glided behind veils of snow and sleet on its hounded path toward the horizon — a path it was doomed to cross five times in each span of twenty-four hours, lest it be torn from the sky and crash down upon the Earth that drew it ever more strongly, to which it must at last succumb — today, tomorrow, or within the year.

Unknowing, the riders stood beneath their fate — a fate soon to be fulfilled — that a new Earth might be born beneath a new heaven, and the world once more become a paradise, as the ancient tales told it had been before the glassy sea appeared in the sky. New cultures would blossom from the ruins the sundered, dying moon would one day scatter across land and ocean, until in some distant age another satellite was caught in Earth's embrace — another glassy sea, mingled with fire — to bring mankind of that future an even greater, more terrible deluge than the one now threatening these riders at the trembling edge of the cliff.

The horse-keeper wedged himself as comfortably as possible into a crevice and held the shivering, rough-coated mounts by the reins, grateful to remain here in relative safety.

Galmon and the other soldiers, however, climbed higher among the rocks, where in the freezing air the slaves of Jochaan were blasting caves into the hard sandstone — the grottos where Jochaan, with part of the Abessian people, meant to await the coming catastrophe that his visionary mind had foreseen. With the clear, practical intellect of a sober man of science, he was determined to prepare against it.

And yet, Jochaan himself could scarcely have explained why he built the caves, though he had been asked often enough. Perhaps he did not fully know, or could not put the reasons into words — but he drove the work on with relentless persistence, as if he knew the reasons perfectly well. He was convinced that one day the glassy sea would fall upon the Earth — though he could offer no proof of this belief.

How and in what form this fall would occur, he could only guess from ancient legends, which told that such a disaster had befallen the home-star of mankind more than once before. From them he concluded that it might be possible — for humanity, or at least for a remnant of it — to survive the world-embracing catastrophe, which would strike the whole globe without mercy, by

taking refuge in secure caverns high in the mountains, or perhaps by enduring it aboard solidly built ships and floating dwellings strong enough to withstand the storm.

Gasping for breath, Galmon paused in the climb.

Though still vigorous for his age, the old soldier's lungs labored; after more than sixty cycles of the clouds, his heart was no longer strong enough to master the thin, icy air.

Avalanches thundered down the slopes, dragging boulders and scree in a whirling rush into the abyss below. Whirlwinds of snow spun about the climbers, rising up the mountainsides in twisted columns, only to plunge suddenly into fog-filled, immeasurable depths.

High among the cliffs the western storm howled in deep and shrill organ tones, tearing long banners of snow far out into the dim air. Yet the ascent to the holy mountain was not as difficult as Galmon had feared, for the troop was climbing the eastern flank, sheltered from the eternal tempest roaring from the west.

Stunted oak shrubs clung with gnarled roots to weathered cracks in the rock, in poor soil; thorn bushes crawled up the ravines and vanished into the mist; green moss peered cheerfully from beneath whirled heaps of snow; and across gray, sparse grassy slopes a cave bear fled swiftly, vanishing ghostlike into the swirling fog-dance.

Far below in the valley, the rushing song of the passing sea-current echoed in its endless melody — falling silent at times when the booming thunder of volcanic eruptions seized the leading voice.

Galmon halted to give his men rest, for the climb through the thin air quickly exhausted them.

On a patch of green grass, the men lay down like a herd of black-furred beasts, huddled close for warmth against the cold that pierced even the hardened, rain-soaked soldiers to the bone.

The fire-drill screeched against the hard wood until, after endless effort, the first spark sprang forth — and from the smoking, damp mountain twigs a small, meager flame began to glow. The men greeted it with cheerful laughter, though its heat was slight.

Then, silent and grave again, the half-bestial remnants of antediluvian mankind lay around the flickering heap of brushwood — their black eyes, dulled

by generations of hardship and elemental struggle, fixed sadly upon the consoling flame.

They did not know that, in unimaginably distant ages, there had been happier men than they — men who had lived beneath a radiant sun, for whom the Earth had been a paradise. Only the oldest, almost unbelievable legends whispered of quiet, warm nights beneath a shimmering sky of stars — of a time when there was no "time," when eternal spring had kindly blurred the change of seasons, so that the years passed in a gentle rhythm of day and night, of shining sunlight and star-lit calm; when men could count their days but not their years, for there was no measure — no moon to mark their months, since the moon did not yet exist.

The glassy sea sank swiftly below the eastern horizon. Now, for a few hours, it was truly night.

Mournful, monotonous chants drifted from their rough, animal throats — an ancient lament of tormented humanity echoing across the quaking slopes and crags. From afar, thunder rolled out of the glowing mountains, a dark, menacing accompaniment.

With a cruel jolt the holy mountain rose and fell, as though the powers of the deep were lifting and dropping it like a plaything. The little campfire went out, and the song broke off abruptly.

Paralyzed with terror, the soldiers clung to one another.

"The holy mountain's beginning to dance, men!" Galmon tried to jest — though even in the fearless old warrior's throat terror sat like a hard, choking lump.

No laughter answered him. The men listened with pounding hearts to the detonations bursting in the bowels of the earth, and to the eerie hissing of boiling water in unfathomable depths below.

The soldiers scarcely understood him. Their good humor was gone.

What must things look like now down in the valley — in the king's hall? That was their home, after all, even if they had to live packed together, man against man, in the narrow antechamber of the royal court like caged wild beasts. But at least it was warm and cozy there: a fire burned on the stone hearth, and the little, beautiful king's sister would sometimes come like a kindly spirit, using one of them as a seat cushion because it was warm and comfortable for her — just as one might sit upon a faithful house pet.

"The world will soon come to an end," someone muttered dully and resignedly within the wild mass of men.

"You're as crazy as Jochaan!" Galmon forced a laugh, puzzled as to which of his soldier-beasts could suddenly have developed philosophical leanings.

"I don't know, my lord," came the same voice from the darkness. "It's possible that I am mad. I haven't thought about it. But the earth will perish. Jochaan — the stranger, the great magician, the friend of the slaves — he knows that it will be so. The glassy sea will crash down upon us, and then it will be over. Perhaps that's for the best, my lord. I almost wish it would come soon, so this torment would finally end."

Galmon was speechless.

Never before had one of his soldiers spoken such a long speech!

Had that terrible earthquake, which made the holy mountain dance like a ball, loosened the tongues of his brave beasts so that they could talk like learned men?

Could it be that this strange man Jochaan had truly awakened their spirits — made them think about what the future might bring, awakened them from their hopeless, animal-like dullness? It must be so!

The soldier had called Jochaan "a friend of the slaves."

How had the king's architect come to befriend slaves when he enjoyed the friendship of princes?

Well, after all, Jochaan was himself a slave in truth — so why shouldn't he befriend his own kind? That, at least, was understandable enough.

"Didn't Nephat tell you that Jochaan's talk about the glassy sea is nonsense?" Galmon asked in astonishment. "That the earth will remain as it is, and that no stars can fall from the heavens?"

Another rough voice answered out of the night.

"It was Nephat's confidant who just spoke. I saw him nod to the high priest as we left the king's courtyard. If he speaks this way and is close to the priest, you can imagine, my lord, how much faith he has in him."

Galmon frowned.

The scoundrel of a pagan priest was clearly meddling again in his military affairs and keeping informants among the soldiers — no doubt to spy

on him, the old heretical field commander. Such deceit was just like Nephat, and it wasn't the first time Galmon had noticed it. Luckily, the priest seemed to have misjudged the loyalty of his spies, for the soldier's tone had not sounded particularly trusting toward him.

Still, it was an outrageous insolence that one of his men had dealings with that priest.

"What business has Nephat with you?" Galmon growled threateningly, his hand groping in the dark for the whip of mammoth hide — ready to flog the soldier as soon as the light of the glassy sea rose again from the west.

"I know you're going to beat me, my lord," said the first voice tonelessly. "And you're right to beat me — I should have told you right away that Nephat paid me money to spy on Jochaan, and to report to the high priest everything he said and did."

So — the villainy wasn't aimed at me after all, thought the old man, letting his hand drop from the whip.

Of course — it was against Jochaan! He should have guessed it.

"Are you Jochaan's enemy?" he asked into the darkness where his soldiers crouched.

"I can't say that here," came the muffled reply.

But through the huddled ranks of the men ran a rough, grating laugh.

"There's none among us who's Jochaan's enemy," said a third voice — and fell silent again, as if he'd already said too much.

Galmon grumbled to himself in astonishment. It almost seemed as if the fellows were proud of having such a fellow-slave as Jochaan.

Well — he couldn't blame them. He himself could be proud of such a comrade! The old commander found himself thinking of the foreign architect, and of what the man had once said about how people should be treated.

"Don't beat your men so often," Jochaan had told him once — and it had sounded almost like a warning. "You may one day need their love and loyalty. You lash them cruelly for the smallest offenses. Do you ever treat your wolfhounds that harshly? And yet these are men too — men like you and me."

That had been an outrageous notion — coming from this Jochaan! Wasn't the architect a dangerous reformer, maybe even a subversive?

And yet, Galmon had rarely seen him speaking with the soldiers — and when he did, it was only with a few friendly jests, easily excused in a man who, after all, was only a slave and a servant of the king, just like those soldiers.

"What did Jochaan tell you?" Galmon pressed, suspicious.

"What would he say to poor soldiers, my lord?" answered the first voice. "He said nothing to us — only that, when he went up to the holy mountain, he told me we should come to him with our wives and children when the time was fulfilled."

"What's that supposed to mean — when the time is fulfilled?" the old man growled irritably, though a chill ran down his back at those words, which he too had once heard from Jochaan's own lips.

"We don't know," came the answer from several sides.

Galmon fell silent.

A dull foreboding gripped him — a sense that Jochaan's power over hearts was greater than he could comprehend, and that this power was not built upon the evidence of the mammoth-hide whip — that tried and trusted power which Galmon had wielded so successfully in war and in peace, and therefore had believed to be absolute and unshakable.

Was there, perhaps, another kind of power — one even stronger?

Was there a power of the heart that could compel obedience from men who were nothing but worthless slaves and beasts — not of noble birth like kings and generals?

Here, in the darkness of that brief night, Galmon realized that he himself had long been ensnared by this mysterious power of Jochaan — and that he would never again be free of it.

Here, too, he understood why he had always felt Nephat to be a consummate scoundrel and Jochaan a man worthy of reverence.

Galmon was, at heart, no different from his rough soldiers — a loyal, honor-loving man, a kind of chief slave to King Tutmon; simple and straightforward beneath his layer of practical and learned cunning, a primitive heart that still valued decency.

The high priest, however, was his opposite.

Cunning and deceitful by nature, and by his office as idol-priest almost predestined to be so, Nephat was an unshakably zealous supporter of the royal house of Tutmon — because self-interest demanded that loyalty.

There, upon the holy mountain, sits a will of iron! the thought flashed suddenly through Galmon's mind.

That tenacious, unyielding determination to carry through one's purpose — there was something magnificent in it.

Until now, that will had worked to the king's benefit.
But was it not possible that one day… it might turn otherwise?

What if Jochaan's work high in the cliffs was not madness after all?
But then — what was it?

At that very moment, the glassy sea rose in the west, casting its murky light as though it wished to give a loud and clear answer to the question the old soldier had asked himself — a question he could not answer.

The dim, brief night had passed.
A growing twilight first appeared faintly, then ever brighter, emerging through the fluttering mist above the western stone giants and revealing again the rough path the men were compelled to follow by the king's command.

The grassy slope, across which only hours before the cave bear had trotted to escape the uncanny nearness of men, was now buried beneath towering heaps of white sandstone hurled down from the mountains by the earthquake. Already snow was swirling busily around the strangers from the heights of the holy mountain, wrapping them in a soft shroud of white powder.

The men advanced hesitantly, climbing over scree and rubble, their wary eyes turned upward in anxious watchfulness, for the rocks swayed like ships in a storm and could at any moment send another deadly greeting crashing down into the valley.
Yet the holy mountain of Jochaan seemed firm — a secure cradle upon the great swinging Earth, as Galmon had said — its stony core deeply anchored in the fiery womb of the world.

Now and then a rotten fragment broke loose and tumbled with a crash down the slope, but far from the climbers, and disaster passed them by at places where they were not.

The higher they climbed along the eastern slope, their lungs gasping in the thin air, the quieter the storm became.

One might almost have thought a miracle had taken place upon the Abessian Islands, and that the ceaseless west wind had finally grown weary of blowing.

But high above their heads, the snow banners streaming horizontally into the open air told the men that no such miracle had occurred — everything was as before; only the nearly vertical eastern wall at this point provided a perfect shelter from the wind.

Yet other creatures of the alpine world had also found this natural refuge, and now stared with fierce, bewildered eyes at the band of human intruders — wild beasts of primeval size and strength: cave bears, saber-toothed cats, and skulking wolves.

Galmon instinctively halted, tightening his grip on the leather shield with his left hand.

With his right he raised the stone axe, ready for attack.

The soldiers behind him did the same, muttering prayers they had learned from the priests to ward off danger. The column drew closer together.

But the terror of the earthquake still seemed to linger in the bones of the mountain beasts as well; they stared fearfully with flickering eyes at the strange intruders in their eastern refuge and did not think of attacking.

Indeed, they seemed to shrink back — one after another pressing their supple, massive bodies into the brush or beneath fallen boulders.

The wolves howled eerily in animal fear, and across the gray moss darted, with swift and frightened movements, a crocodile-sized, spiny lizard whose green eyes glimmered like coals.

Shapes flickered before the men — ghostly forms of fleeing, strange creatures, half-seen in the gray mist; now and then a stone clattered down into the depths, kicked loose by a running paw.

In a thicket below them, under sparse green leaves, something stirred; a furious growl and snarl rose from the ground as the soldiers were about to pass.

Galmon halted, though every instinct urged him to hurry past this eerie paradise of beasts without having to fight for his skin.

“A trap!” he muttered in surprise and stepped closer.

At a narrow ravine someone had built a predator trap — cleverly concealed and camouflaged with the cunning that only primitive hunters possess, those who must use their wits to master their prey.

"It's full," said one of the soldiers, his eyes gleaming, and the hunting lust of the human predator flared up in the dull faces of the warriors.

Galmon carefully pulled a few branches aside from the trap — and saw a strange sight.

Two mountain antelopes sat there in peaceful company with one of their greatest enemies — a huge cave tiger.

In one corner crouched, resigned to his fate, a small red fox whose cunning had finally failed him; he seemed to have given up the struggle for life. His fine brush lay drooping between his hind legs, and his ears hung down over his narrow snout like two large, autumn-colored leaves.

"It's Jochaan's pantry!" Galmon laughed.

"So, this is what a builder understands as well — setting traps like a trained hunter! I've often wondered where he got food for all those workers. Twice ten times ten men have to eat! — I might have guessed it. That man's a clever head — none like him in all Tulma."

The simple trap, in its practical design, pleased the old soldier more than all the other knowledge of the foreign architect. What he saw here spoke his own language — that of soldier and hunter — and he had to admit that everything Jochaan built was well made.

They continued upward along the eastern slope; in the distance the roar of the world sea's rushing surf could still be heard, hidden beneath the racing cloud masses.

Here, the thin, cold air was utterly still — barely a single snowflake wandered down over the grassy incline.

From the mountain path, a stone-carved stairway branched off.

"Stop, Galmon! You've reached your destination, if it's Jochaan you seek," echoed a voice from above.

"Climb the steps with your soldiers, and be welcome in the solitude of my mountain!"

"Jochaan!" cried several of the soldiers.

JOCHAAN

Up above stood the strange scholar and master builder of stone, wrapped in his bearskin, one foot at the edge of the swaying abyss, his crooked arms clasped around a low tree.

His brown, bearded face shone with carefree joy at the arrival of Galmon — the old, comical field commander whose goodwill he was sure of, and who would bring no unwelcome message… unless he had been forced to come.

Beside the foreign scholar stood Araton, the queen's brother. His fair face and blue eyes were turned toward the newcomers with a look of both expectation and mistrust, as they climbed without delay up the steps — real, well-made steps, fitted with a handrail of wrought copper, leading to Jochaan's rock dwellings.

Dark-skinned slaves — men and women — crowded curiously at the mouth of the cave, holding strange tools made of a black, gleaming metal that at once caught Galmon's attention, for he had never seen such before. The old soldier's eyes darted about, scanning everything.

Several openings pierced the stone wall, and from each peered human heads.

"Come in, you poor frozen and battered men!" laughed Jochaan happily.

"See for yourselves the dwelling of the mad builder of King Tutmon — and judge whether it is not rather comfortable up here on the icy mountain heights!"

He lightly took Galmon's arm and led him through the narrow entrance of the nearest grotto. From within came bright, ringing hammer blows that echoed deafeningly through the dim chamber, where, by flickering firelight, slaves labored to hollow out the massive sandstone.

At a sign from Araton, the noise ceased.

The workers gathered up their black tools and withdrew, pleased at the pause in their weary toil, through a fissure in the rock — evidently into an adjoining chamber already completed — from which came the muffled murmur of restless voices.

A pleasant warmth filled the half-dark space, for on a hearth carved directly from the living sandstone, a cheerful fire burned behind chiseled walls.

Galmon shook his head at such extravagant comfort — warmth like this was a luxury one could scarcely afford on the holy mountain, where wood was so scarce.

"You've come at the right moment," said Jochaan, pressing his distinguished guest down onto a fur-cushioned chair.

"In a moment the glassy sea will darken for the second time — but the sun will rise and bring us the pleasant hour of our meal."

Jochaan clapped his hands; Galmon thought to himself — he acts more like a king than a slave!

A woolly head appeared in the crack through which the workers had vanished and nodded to the master builder with a friendly grin. He had understood — it was time to eat.

Meanwhile, the soldiers had laid aside their weapons and furs, crowding naked around the warm, crackling fire on the stone hearth to dry themselves. As they did so, they peered curiously into the flames, puzzled not to see any wooden branches — the usual coal. How could the fire burn without them? It glowed red from strange, black stones. They knew nothing of the combustible rocks Jochaan had found down near the sea, buried between layers of sandstone. Suspicious and superstitious, their dull eyes stared at the burning marvel — but the aroma of roasting meat quickly silenced any scientific questions that might have risen to their unaccustomed lips.

At a common table, masters and servants alike ate heartily of what Jochaan's kitchen provided. Even a renewed and terrible earthquake could only briefly disturb the comfortable cheer that had settled over the merry feast. Only Jochaan glanced now and then toward the entrance, his bright, watchful eyes studying the massive, solidly cut doorway. Not a stone moved under the violent shaking of the earth. The entire cavern shifted evenly with the shock, while outside the thunder of falling rock faded into a dull rumble.

The king's master builder nodded with satisfaction, his broad, high-browed head gleaming in the firelight, and smiled at his friend Araton. The cave was sound and strong; with luck, it would withstand even mightier earthstorms yet to come.

Jochaan folded his crooked, crippled arms across his broad bare chest and watched, half-laughing, as the feasting guests tore at the roasted meat like wild beasts, biting into it with their teeth.

"Important, important, that is!" he murmured softly.

Araton laughed in amusement. He knew his friend well — after long companionship he was used to Jochaan's odd turns of phrase, and he guessed immediately what the king's builder meant by those half-muttered words.

"Have you guessed what I was thinking," Jochaan asked with a gleam of his white, healthy teeth, "when I saw the haunch disappear and the wine sink away as if it were water into a parched volcano?"

Araton nodded in agreement and laughed at Galmon's astonished face, where a trace of mistrust showed. The old soldier had the uneasy feeling that prince and slave were making fun of him — for he had already drained his fifth cup of wine and was eyeing the next with hungry longing.

"Yes, old field commander," Araton said seriously. "You see again, Jochaan talks like a madman. — But I'll tell you what he meant with his words and his laughter: it's important that a man have good food and drink when want and misfortune are about him, because if the body is well provided for, we have already gained infinitely much and can endure things we otherwise wouldn't be equal to. — Was that right, my Jochaan?"

The king's master builder nodded with a twinkling, amused eye.

"What do you mean by want and misfortune, Prince?" Galmon asked, gnawing at a bone with not very pretty motions like a bear, because supposedly the best meat always clings to the bone. "I feel very comfortable here unbidden, and if the world perishes now, let it do so for all I care. I sit here and eat. Jochaan's cradle is firm and good. Let the rocking earth sway!"

Araton and Jochaan nodded to each other, laughing.

"We sit here and eat while the world goes out of joint!" the scholar repeated. "That is exactly my view, Galmon. And when the glassy sea crashes down, so that the mountains roar in pain and the ocean current sprays into the sky, then we will sit together here comfortably and eat and let the cups clash, because none of it concerns us. And if hell is let loose outside and howls around our rock entrance like a thousand raging devils, then we'll nail boards before it and stuff furs in the seams so we hear and see nothing, and sit down to table as if nothing had happened. And if the table overturns and the stools can no longer stand on their blocks, then we'll blame the wine that toppled them and lie down on the floor and eat there. — One day the wild whirling dance of earth and moon will be over, and if we are still able, then…"

"We shall eat again!" the old field commander interrupted enthusiastically. "So I'll put up with it if the world goes to the devil! It already isn't what it used to be, it seems to me, and it's high time it changed, though I

don't know how! — So, my Jochaan, if you allow, I'll begin the end of the world once more."

Galmon seized another piece of meat and attacked it as if it were his first. The old man's stomach was obviously still as indestructible as it had been forty cloud-times ago. Jochaan thought that in this way the merry soldier would sooner burst than the earth or the glassy sea.

"Careful, careful!" cried the builder laughing, for a heavy quake suddenly drove the goats' mallet deep into Galmon's throat, causing him to have a coughing fit and look around the circle with a face flushed red. The soldier-animals laughed, though some of them had toppled from their stools; they laughed in the rough, soldierly triumph at their field commander's mishap, as has always been the custom.

The queen's brother laid his ring-adorned hand on Galmon's arm. With tearful eyes the old field commander saw the prince Araton's narrow, pale face, which betrayed a faint unease.

"Do you know how things look down in Tulma, namely in the royal court?" he asked, full of worry. "These quakes must, I fear, be much worse down there in the valley than here among our massive rock."

Galmon drew a deep breath and tried to put his scattered thoughts in order, which had been jolted by the coughing fit.

"When I rode away from Tulma with my men, things were in better shape, Prince," he reported plainly in his soldier's tone. "I notified you at the time, when the temple of the sacred dragon collapsed and the ropes on the king's hall were torn, that your people were well. Since that time the shocks have indeed become heavier and more frequent, as you have felt up here, but the temple of the sacred dragon has been rebuilt after repeated vain attempts — this time, however, only one storey, following the advice of our builder Jochaan — and the king's hall is hardly recognizable beneath its stout ropes."

"And the beast?" Jochaan asked briefly. A look of pity for human folly flickered across his mouth.

"The holy beast still lives," Galmon replied contemptuously. "The king struck it on the head when he captured it; that did not kill it. I later struck it on the tail; then it became so lively that the lord and I almost fared badly. I only wanted to know where on such an animal the important parts are. Not apparently in the head — that became clear to me."

"This is rare among men as well," Jochaan smiled mischievously. "Usually it sits in them as it does in the dragon…"

The king's master builder paused and pressed his lips together. Araton laughed at his friend and shook his head.

"You can never stay serious, Jochaan, even when the matter is so grave," he said with a knowing look at the scholar's secretly laughing eyes.

"Isn't life itself a chain of overwhelming comedy, my lord?" Jochaan countered. "I believe that Nature—or the Great Spirit who governs it, as I see it—created humor to make life bearable; otherwise it would be dreadfully dull. I would not wish to remain a slave to the king for another moment if ever I lost my laughter. — But go on, my field commander, and forgive the interruption."

"Where was I?" the old man muttered, searching for the broken thread of his story.

"At the hollow heads of men—or no, at the hollow head of the beast of Tulma that the king could not kill," Jochaan helpfully supplied with a kindly air.

"Right!" confirmed Galmon seriously, ignoring the scholar's laughing eyes. "Now the people pray every day to that poor, battered creature, begging it to make the earthquakes cease, and at the same time they sacrifice to the staring eyes of the beasts at the glassy sea, so that the bitter water may turn sweet again—the same that brought us the hideous gland-sickness. Even the king suffers from festering glands and is in great pain. The queen herself has fallen ill too; only the little king's sister is cheerful and healthy—at least, she shoved me so hard in the belly as I left the royal hall that I nearly lost my breath."

For a while there was silence. Then Jochaan said in a tone of deep disappointment: "So, even the water from the newly built conduit—from the rocks of the holy mountain—has turned bitter. I was mistaken, then, in believing that this water would remain drinkable when that of the valley grew foul and brackish under the influence of earthquakes and fire-mountains. Human power is small in such a time, when the forces of great Nature rise against it. — Even the king's master builder must recognize that he is but an ignorant man."

"Hm," grumbled the old field commander awkwardly, shifting uneasily on his stool. "I must confess to you, my Jochaan, that the water conduit hasn't been worked on at all since you left. I don't rightly know why, but Nephat declared the hill-cuttings sheer nonsense, and the king raised no objection. The people were satisfied too, for they hated the heavy digging and sided with the high priest. I can understand that. They had all the more time to dance and hold festivals. Since the great earthquake, society in Tulma has gone completely to the dogs, and I think even Nephat's art of ruling men has come to an end. He may well regret now having kept them from their work."

"The poor priest," said Jochaan, staring motionlessly ahead.

"If we were sitting alone at this table, I'd allow myself to use a different word than you did," Galmon growled darkly and with caution.

"Yes, I know, field commander—you do not love that man," Jochaan replied absently, as though his thoughts were elsewhere. But on Araton's pale brow the veins swelled, and his blue eyes darkened with anger.

"Has my royal brother-in-law been abandoned by all reason," he burst out indignantly, "that he has not had the vital water conduit continued? Did not Jochaan impress upon him that this was the most urgent and important thing? Did he not also set out the reasons clearly and at length—how the health of the whole people might be at stake if it were not built?"

The king's master builder softly laid his hand on the prince's arm, and at once Araton fell silent, ashamed and subdued.

"The good king is ill," said Jochaan soothingly.

"Tutmon does not have an easy position against the powerful priesthood of Tulma, and you know they are not kindly disposed toward me—whatever their reasons may be. I can understand that this time he yielded—though in the wrong place. You mustn't forget, my lord, he lacked the counterweights that were on the holy mountain when that unfortunate decision was made."

"He was healthy when he gave the order to halt the construction," Araton objected quietly. "He only fell ill afterward, when the springs in Tulma turned foul and bitter. I think we may speak that plainly."

"It is done," Jochaan replied firmly. "No one can undo what has happened, and the search for guilt is always foolish and pointless—it helps nothing and only breeds needless enmity, which we truly cannot afford anymore." He turned again to the commander of the royal guard. "How stand the fortresses in the north of the realm? Have the winter provisions been replenished?"

"That is why I am here," said Galmon. "The fortresses are, fortunately, in order. Sadly, the king cannot ride to Nordland this year. Therefore I bring command that Prince Araton is to assume leadership of the northern campaign and take the field in the king's stead. I ask you then, my prince," he turned to the queen's brother, "to return to Tulma as soon as possible and present yourself to the king, who will issue further orders. The levies on the island farms are complete. Unfortunately, our forces are rather small this time, for a third of the men are stricken with the gland-sickness and cannot be mustered. But the

fortresses that Jochaan has built for us on the White Rock are strong, and their very presence blocks the valleys and passes. I also hope the ice bridges, despite the harsh winter said to have broken out up there, will not freeze as solidly as before, for the quakes will do their part to shatter them again and again."

"That will be a farewell without return, Araton," said Jochaan gravely, his eyes closed. Galmon burst into carefree laughter. He viewed the northern campaign differently, having gone through it too many times to share such fears.

"Let's not hope for that," he said confidently. "Prince Araton is to wed the king's sister Zista upon his return — that's reason enough to make sure he comes back soon! I can easily imagine I'd strike double sword-blows a day just to hasten home."

"Marry the princess at once, my prince—before your departure north—and take her with you," said Jochaan, gazing into the void. His hard mouth tightened, and his eyelids closed over his brilliant eyes as if to prevent himself from revealing things that concerned no one but himself.

"What is it, Jochaan?" asked Araton, worried.

For a while the master builder sat silent, eyes closed.

"I wanted, in my heart, to strike you dead, dear lord," said the scholar slowly, his voice taut. "But I overcame myself and told you what you must do, for I know you love the young king's sister. Take her with you to the North, my lord. Take her with you — if you have ever heeded your servant Jochaan, heed him now! For the time is nearly fulfilled, the hour is near. The ring of ancient legend is about to close, and ruin rides upon the shattered earth. Therefore take the king's sister with you! Whether you take her or not — you will not return."

In the eyes of the rough men seated at Jochaan's table glimmered superstitious dread; black, flickering pupils stared fearfully at the closed lids of the strange man who again seemed to be raving, as he so often did. Instinctively, Galmon edged cautiously away from his host.

Then Jochaan tore open his great eyes and fixed his royal friend with a piercing stare.

"Will you grant me, as the last love on this earth, the thing I am about to ask?" he said swiftly.

The queen's brother shuddered beneath the mysterious, bright flame of his friend's gaze.

"I will do as you wish, Jochaan," promised Araton. "I'll take Zista with me to the North if it will set your mind at ease, and I'll guard her faithfully, as though it were you yourself charged with her safety. Still, I'm confident I'll return soon. I think you're mistaken to believe that I shall fall—or otherwise perish. You're no soldier, Jochaan, and you overestimate the danger that awaits me in battle with the white Northmen. Don't forget that through your wisdom I'm armed as no prince of the Abessian Isles has ever been armed— with the iron staff by which we shall one day rule the world and tend its peoples. Your black metal is victory and return. So don't trouble yourself. Truly, it seems quite unnecessary."

"You do not understand my words this time, my lord," replied the scholar in a calm, clear voice. "The sword of the new black metal that I smelted from the ore of the mountains and forged in the burning stones there by the hearth will indeed protect you against every human or beastly foe. But it is not the enemy who threatens you—it is the fate of the Earth and of the Glassy Sea. Once again I tell you: the time is fulfilled, Araton; the circle is nearly closed. Yet I know neither the time nor the hour when He shall come who will make the world anew—for He comes like a thief in the night, and in a single hour all that men have built is destroyed, the city is fallen where the merchants grew rich, and the voice of the harpists will sound in it no more. I see a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, and the sea is no more! But you, Araton, who go northward, will be torn away by the sea that here shall be no more—to that place from which there is no return, for time and space will have grown too vast to bridge the gulf. Therefore take Zista with you, for you will not see her again if you ride alone to Nordland."

"What words are these, Jochaan!" cried Galmon in fright, clutching his brow as if to ward off the spirits crowding visibly around the table. The soldiers shrank together, shuddering, and murmured prayers. The scholar smiled and exhaled, as if awakening from a deep, tormenting dream.

"Yes, they are only words, field commander," he said kindly, gently. "Perhaps they have meaning too—if the ancient legends of my far homeland have meaning. What will come, will come without our doing, and it's quite possible I'm mistaken; I am, after all, only a man like you. Yet I believe firmly that the will of the Great Spirit, who guides the Glassy Sea above the clouds, will be fulfilled, whether we are content with it or not. High above human love and hatred reigns the stern law of eternal Nature—the law we do not yet know, but which shall be revealed to men when their hour has come. The happiness given to us for a short while, we must seize and savor as one drinks wine in insatiable thirst before a stronger hand comes to snatch the cup from our lips. — So drink your joy, Araton, while it is still possible. My advice is nothing more than simple wisdom of life when I tell you: take the king's sister with you. When the fist of fate strikes you, it will be too late for drinking."

"Come with me outside, Jochaan," said Araton, rising from his stool. "I wish to speak with you alone."

The friends left the cave and sat together outside upon the stone steps of the trembling stairway that swayed with the earthquake.

"You know, Jochaan, that I must go where the king calls me," the prince began. "That is an ancient duty—what binds together nations and realms. I'll believe you when you say I shall not return, for I know you don't speak your words idly like women and fools. But why should I drag little Zista with me into ruin, Jochaan? For a prince of the Abessian Isles, love is a cheap thing—you know that as well as I do. I could take another with me, if I wished. But the sunny king's sister must be saved. She shall stay here."

Jochaan looked into the blue eyes of his princely friend as though he must read his very heart—piercingly, with grave intensity. A deep unrest lay across the scholar's furrowed face.

"If you love her, my lord, then take her with you," he pleaded.

"I love her, and precisely for that reason I leave her here," the prince answered sharply and briefly. In his noble, weather-browned features there appeared the trace of a half-good-natured, half-pained smile. He propped his head on his hand and stared quietly into the fluttering gray mist.

"You will not grant the last wish of your servant who loves you, my lord?" Jochaan asked.

"Look at the courtier, Jochaan—sly and full of love!" the prince laughed and laid his narrow hand on the scholar's crippled right hand.

"You think you can see through me, my lord?" the king's master-builder asked.

"In this matter you are transparent, my Jochaan," Araton replied. "Why should I take the child with me into death—who does not love me? That would be harsher than I can bear to be responsible for. I will leave her here. As you say, the time is nearly fulfilled. Our kingdom will fall, as everything decays on the old rotten earth—so it is, Jochaan? Ancient barriers will collapse because immeasurable natural forces will smash them like rotten wood that must be replaced by new; new men will guide the fortunes of the new earth. Who will be king on that new earth you say is coming soon? Who will rule under the new heaven that will rise above us? — Whoever is strong and wise, who masters life against death and destruction and holds the future in his hands. I know who that is, and I think you know it too. — Therefore I will leave my little king's sister here and entrust her to you, for she loves you, Jochaan, the unfree master-builder

of the king, the ruler of the new earth and the master of the future who will tend peoples with an iron rod."

Jochaan raised his crooked hand. "Who can know whether we who remain behind may not also die?" he asked breathlessly and tormented. "I cannot see who will escape the calamity—whether you in the distant North or I in a southern mountain cave. And as for Zista, you know perfectly well that the little king's sister is not a woman for a slave. Your servant Jochaan will remain alone, as he has been since he learned to think, for solitude is necessary for men who live for a great idea. Think rather of the queen, your noble sister, Araton, and of her suffering when she learns that you left Zista behind for my sake."

"So be it, then," the prince said sadly.

Across Jochaan's large, stern features there passed the gleam of a faint triumph. Who is transparent now, Araton, you sole friend of a poor lonely slave? Is it really Jochaan through whom you can see as through clear crystal? How my remark about the queen—your splendid, clever sister—struck you! Triple-plated and opaque sits your poor friend beside you, and you do not know that it is not the good queen to whom my heart belongs when, in rare hours, I listen down into the depths of my breast, to see whether Jochaan's heart, in long suffering and ceaseless care and work, has not burned and grown numb. It is your little princess, whom you possess by the king's decree, who has turned the old learned and so foolish Jochaan's heart and head, so that at times he would like to cry out with longing for her love. But you, Araton, shall not know it, because you love her as well—it cannot be otherwise. Think of your servant Jochaan fondly and without resentment in the distance; he loves you and will not take from you what belongs to you, so long as thoughts and will obey. Believe, if you must, that my heart is secretly given to the queen Aramut; think what you will—yet you shall be secure before your friend. Now I know that you will take her with you. I cast aside what I dreamed and planned for the future, for it was perhaps wrong, since it touched the property of a friend—

Jochaan sat silently by the prince as he thought this. Araton too was silent, turning his thoughts to Zista and to the commanded and much-desired marriage to the spirited little princess.

"You will take the child without anxiety, my lord," Jochaan finally broke the silence. "You see, this time it is not so hard to grant the last request of a friend."

"You send the child into certain doom!" Araton cried, anguished. "The king's sister will not come back if I lead her away!"

"That I know," came the harsh reply.

"It is true—you cannot love her," the prince replied with a deep breath of relief.

"I love you, and that is more," said Jochaan, eyes closed. In his heart a cry arose: Take that lie back, Jochaan! But he would not listen to the voice.

He had to remain free—independent of all human entanglements; he must be without a woman's love when the time was fulfilled. So he cast away the little beloved princess as men surrender their dearest possession for the sake of a greater purpose that rises beyond human love and hate.

Araton rose slowly from the steps of the rocky stairway.

"I will take her with me—perhaps I will take her," he said hesitantly, uncertain. "I would rather leave the decision to her. I will tell her what you said, Jochaan—that we will not return if she rides with me to Nordland. If she then wishes to remain behind, she may. It would be a pity for the child, who is the joy and sunshine of the gloomy royal hall. I did not know, Jochaan, that it would be so hard to part from you—not because I fear death, do not think that! I feel a weight upon my heart, as though I were causing you a greater pain than that of a final farewell."

"Be without concern, my lord," the king's master builder smiled. "It is I myself who inflict the pain, no other. That is sometimes necessary if one is to remain strong for the sake of the Earth's future."

Araton searched his friend's eyes. As so often, these words were shadowed with mystery. Were not the scholar's great eyes uncertain? Did not a tremor run across the furrowed features of the lonely man?

Jochaan turned away slowly. The prince thought: Now I have seen through you at last, you unseeable one! Long enough have I been your pupil to learn to read in your eyes what you would keep hidden, and I have come to know every movement of your heart through our long communion of thought. I will give you, as a parting gift, what already belongs to you, though you know it not. I will not be smaller of spirit than you.

"One more thing, my lord," Jochaan began again after a long silence. "I will give you a basket of carrier pigeons we have tamed and fed together. When you are far from here, send your Jochaan word as often as you can. You know how to carve letters upon the thin, colored feathers, as I taught you. Write to me when the final things have come—tell me how you fare, and what becomes of the little king's sister—so far as you still can."

"You mean—so far as death has not been quicker, forbidding me to write letters," Araton smiled.

"I did not say that you would die," Jochaan replied calmly. "I only say that we shall not see each other again once you ride north to Nordland. The earth is vast—immeasurably vast for human measure and judgment—so vast that lands and seas can divide us for a lifetime once the world is renewed, without our ever being able to find again the road that leads us together. Only the pigeons may—perhaps—bridge the gulf, or even a single one, if the others perish along the way. Why should we not hold the nearly impossible for possible? The pigeons have wings, like our spirit, which crosses lands and seas with ease. I only lack the time to forge wings for us as well—wings such as the pigeons have by nature. I must leave that to later generations, who will have more time. Let us think of what is today and what tomorrow shall be. — Where, in the North, the mountain-thick ground-ice has clung to the earth in colossal slabs since time immemorial, there fate will find you, before the winter has passed. All the fortresses I built for the king rest upon such mighty plates of ice; warm furs and great stores of meat and grain lie there in crystal cellars that my builders have hewn, and the mammoth herds wander over the vast, glittering ice plains. Remember, my lord, to occupy one of these fortresses at once with men and women when the final things come, for even the dullest slave must by now have seen that the path of the Glassy Sea has drawn ever lower and faster across the Earth in these last days, and that ruin stands near enough to grasp. And if what I counsel you fails, then you will have done what lies within human power. Perhaps merciless frost will destroy you, with all the soldiers, women, and children you take with you; perhaps the Glassy Sea will crush you. Yet perhaps the flood of which the legend speaks will bear you away to a place where you can breathe and live. If it happens so, then write to your Jochaan. And if the dove finds its way to me, Araton, I will no longer mourn the lost friend, but proudly and joyfully praise fate—that a human mind foresaw what was to come, and that what it foresaw has—hopefully—come to pass."

"How you make the impossible possible with your mind, Jochaan!" laughed Araton gaily. "I can already see myself rushing over mountains and lands in the whirling flood, firm and safe upon a mountain-strong floe of white stone, drifting toward far and unknown shores. If I did not know that your mind is clear and sound, I would have to agree with those who say: 'Jochaan is mad.' The suffering of his life has clouded his senses, and he speaks like a foolish seer whom one allows to speak only because one does not wish to wound him with contradiction. Still, I shall do as you advise, Jochaan. I will take the carrier pigeons and send you word whenever I can. But do not be surprised if, one day, a strange and lovely dove flutters into your cave on the holy mountain—a brown dove, one you did not expect, and which will be a rare gift from your distant friend."

The king's master builder did not catch the young prince's last strange words. He was peering intently into the distance, where a human figure was moving along the mountain path. Then a second and a third emerged from the

fog, swaying back and forth with cautious, groping steps. Finally, a larger group of fur-clad, armed men came into view, approaching the stairway.

"There comes a second embassy, my prince," said Jochaan, descending a few steps of his stairway to see more clearly who was coming. "I already sense what they bring me—or rather, what they will take from me. The first took you away; this second one will take from me the means to complete my work. I do not know which of the two evils is greater!"

"What makes you think that, Jochaan?" asked the prince uneasily, and the same foreboding pressed upon his heart—that these men could not be bringers of good news.

Above, Galmon was looking out from the cave. He had already glanced outside several times to see whether the conversation between the two friends was finally at an end.

"Those are my men from Tulma!" the field commander exclaimed in surprise, staring suspiciously and irritably at the winding line of human figures in fur, moving purposefully toward Jochaan's caves. Turning with a good-natured jest to the king's builder, he said, "It seems the men have come to share in your feast for the world's end—the scent of it must have reached all the way to Tulma."

The soldiers climbed the stair and stood among the dwellers of the holy mountain—bleeding, breathless, and with dazed, vacant eyes. They could barely tell what had happened. A rockslide had crashed down among them during one of the terrible earthquakes, burying some of the men and wounding others.

"What good do you bring after all the evil you've met along the way?" Galmon asked, once they had finished their grim account of the ascent to the holy mountain.

"We bring a command from the king: Prince Araton is to bring the slaves down into the valley—those who built the caves for Jochaan," said their leader, repeating his memorized order.

Jochaan burst out laughing—shrill and piercing, like a madman—so that the men laughed awkwardly with him, and then looked around in fearful confusion.

The scholar did not stop laughing. He threw his arms around the prince's neck and, trembling, pressed his face against his friend's chest.

"Why don't you laugh with me?" he suddenly shouted in fury. "Laugh, men—for the time will come when laughter will die in your throats, and you

will howl like the mountain wolves when hunger grips them and they find nothing to eat! Laugh with me over the victory of hollow heads, laugh over the brains of men who sit in their bellies instead of their skulls—like the holy, thrice-holy dragon of Tulma! Will you laugh, you beasts!"

Jochaan's eyes glittered wildly and madly; his crippled arms flailed through the air, jerky and desperate. Then his dreadful laughter rang out again, echoing horribly from the depths of the cave.

The poor, brutalized men laughed under an incomprehensible compulsion—fearfully and in superstitious terror. Even Galmon laughed, though his hair bristled so violently that he thought he could feel each strand standing on end.

Araton stood as if turned to stone.

Then Jochaan leapt down the steps of his stairway like a wild animal and vanished, laughing, into the thick mist. From far below, amid the roaring of the sea's surf in the valley and the muffled organ tones of the storm howling high among the cliffs, his mad laughter faded away.

FAREWELL

"Get ready, Zista. The litter has long been waiting for Princess Araton," said the builder's friend to the little king's sister. "You must grow used to being my wife now and to following wherever I command. Don't make a scene, my dear child. What would people say if they saw that you have tear-stained eyes and a dark, sullen face on your wedding day, like the sky over Tulma? It's not the worst fate, after all, to be the wife of Prince Araton."

"No, no—I know, I know I'm an ungrateful woman, wicked and bad and everything you like," sobbed Zista, distraught. "I want to be sensible, Araton, but I can't. I've known for a long time that the king destined me for you. I even believe—yes, I truly believe—I love you, Araton. Indeed I do, very much, for you are kind and gentle with me and you don't strike me when I'm disobedient or rude. But please, please let me stay here in Tulma! It's so cold in the North, far too cold for your little Zista. Please, my lord, let me stay. When you return, I'll be your obedient wife. You shall never have cause to complain of me, Araton; I'll do for you all the good a girl can do for a man. Only, please—let me stay here."

The little princess hid her brown face in the soft, costly furs on which she lay like a small heap of misery, and wept bitterly.

A tender yet pained smile flickered around Araton's eyes. His fine, clear mouth twitched in half-kindly mockery, half-sorrow. His slender hands played gently through Zista's thick black hair until she, like a wild, stubborn little creature, shook her head and struck at him with her small fist. "Stop that, Araton!" she cried.

"Be still a moment, child, and calmly hear what I wish to tell you—and give you," said the prince. "Jochaan has sent you, as a wedding gift, his colored leather ribbons. He told me to braid them into your beautiful hair as a keepsake from your protector, who now sits lonely and high upon the holy mountain, thinking of me, of little Zista, and of our happiness, and who surely means his gift well. It is but a small and simple token, for Jochaan is a poor servant of the king and cannot give you jewels or gold for your wedding as your brother and the queen have done. He asks you to wear the colored ribbons and think of him, if you deem him worth a thought. But if you do not wish it, I can send the cheap, nearly worthless trinket back to him, since it is hardly fit for a wealthy princess—especially one who already has finer ornaments from her own husband. Shall I do that, little king's sister?"

"No, no!—just braid the ribbons in, Araton," said the girl quickly, her voice suddenly bright and eager, so unlike her earlier tone that it betrayed her.

"But braid them tight, do you hear, Araton?—A princess should never despise even the smallest gift of a poor servant," she added softly.

Araton suppressed a laugh that rose unbidden, though her words filled him with a strange sadness. He shook his head in wonder. How quietly she could sit now, the soft little cat, as he wove the ribbons into her braids—only a purr was missing!

"You still can't read, can you?" asked the prince in passing, fearing she might secretly have practiced that difficult art, as the queen once had.

"I always wanted to learn, but Jochaan was always with Aramut, teaching her. He never paid me any mind," came her voice, wounded and forlorn, from among the panther furs.

"Hm, that's all I wanted to know, little wife," Araton smiled with satisfaction. "So, my brown carrier-pigeon, now you're ready for flight. One ties the ribbons to the bird's leg, the other to its crest—depending which it is. May I braid my pearls beside the ribbons, so all may see you are a prince's wife?"

The scholar's gift had softened Zista's heart. That Jochaan knew nothing of the hastily arranged marriage, and thus had not even thought of sending a wedding gift, she fortunately did not know.

"If it pleases you, Araton, then add the pearls," she agreed magnanimously. "But please, make sure the leather strips can still be seen. People must not say that I was ashamed of a faithful man's humble gift."

"I'll take care, little wife," said Araton, smiling. "I'll braid the pearls into your hair so that they peep out only modestly beneath the leather ribbons. There—now I'm done with this difficult task, which would have given me much joy, if not for—well, shall I tell you something else, Zista, something that will make you happy?" he asked, leaving his unfinished thought hanging.

"What could possibly make me happy, when you're dragging me off to the icy North?" grumbled the girl.

"Doesn't the queen also accompany her lord on his campaigns and journeys?" Araton laughed. "So what I ask is not so unusual—and the king has given his consent. And you won't be cold either. Your Araton will wrap you in warm, luxurious furs, leaving only your little round nose peeking out, and you'll sit by a bright fire while I, out in snow and ice, strike down the northern men. You shall want for no comfort that a rich prince can offer his beautiful wife. I'll even see that you're well entertained—I'll bring along servants and handmaids to pass the time with you when I…"

"You said you'd tell me something pleasant, Araton," Zista reminded her husband, still lying with her stubborn dark head buried in the furs.

"Ah yes—curious princess!" Araton recollected, then added, "Though it's not such a grand tale after all—you seem to expect very much."

"Since you've begun, you might as well tell your stupid story," replied the king's sister tartly.

"Well, it might please you after all. Your Sperr—the faithful companion—is back again, and he'll be coming with us to the North."

"Yes, yes!" said Zista crossly. "And why did you take him from me in the first place? Was that really necessary? You all did everything before the wedding to hurt me and make me miserable. You knew perfectly well that Sperr was my only joy, my only friend in this whole world—and still you took him from me!"

"But child!" said the prince soothingly. "I needed the dog as a messenger for Jochaan. There isn't a more faithful, clever dog than your Sperr anywhere on our islands. So I entrusted him to Galmon, who sent him each day to and from Jochaan's mountain, carrying letters. You know how lonely Jochaan is now since the king took away even the slaves who used to build the caves for him. It must have brought him comfort to receive frequent word from those who love him and wish to ease his solitude. And the letters I wrote—your Sperr carried them tirelessly through the rocks and ravines."

Zista lifted her delicate head, alert and intent. Araton noticed the movement and smiled again—half slyly, half kindly.

"A clever, useful dog, your Sperr," the prince continued, stroking carefully the dark head of his wife, who, to his surprise, now accepted the caress without resistance. "You've no idea how swiftly he always returned. He must know the way to Jochaan's rocky cave so well that he could find it even asleep or in utter darkness. Nor does he fear the wild beasts of the mountains, and he avoids falling rocks as deftly as a seasoned climber."

Now Zista finally sat up, but avoided meeting her husband's eyes—for her conscience was as black as the night, though she felt no remorse for it. In just a few hours, Araton would depart with the rear of the troops and his household—and she was part of that retinue. Then would come the first great halt before the narrow arm of the sea, lying quiet and sheltered in the southeast, where the king's fleet cruised, ready to ferry the army across.

She wanted—and had to—escape before the crossing to the next island, the one lying to the north, where, as she had heard, winter had already begun. If

Araton succeeded in taking her across the arm of the sea, then all hope of Jochaan's kisses—those he had promised her for the tiny, foolish cork—would be lost forever.

The queen's brother read her thoughts. A touch of malice flitted through his heart as he continued speaking.

"Will you get ready now, Zista?" he asked gently, almost coaxingly. "Unfortunately, I cannot be with you when your litter is carried out of Tulma, for I must ride ahead of the rearguard to reach the vanguard, where, by ancient custom, I belong as commander. We will see each other again in a fortress in the North, and there we shall be happy when the weapons fall silent. Sperr shall stay with you—you have in him a loyal friend. Slave women will accompany you as well, to attend to your needs. And I am leaving behind a small guard of trustworthy soldiers from my own tribe, who will vouch for your safety and your unharmed arrival in Nordland. I think I have done everything possible to put your mind at ease."

"I see—you mean to drag me along as a real prisoner!" sobbed the girl, for the mention of guards shattered her fine plan: to escape at the first opportunity to Jochaan on the holy mountain. Araton shrugged his shoulders and whistled sharply through his teeth. Then, with a cruel smile, he said:

"One must keep an eye on you—just as one must on a small wild creature that one has caught with great effort and that still longs for freedom. Besides, the guard is not as terrible as you think. You can ride out on Sperr when the weather allows. He's protection enough in that case—and after all, you'll still be on your home islands, where no one will do you harm."

At these words, something happened that Araton had not expected. Suddenly he felt his wife's slender, cool arms around his neck and her soft, eager mouth pressed against his own.

"Now go on—be off with you!" cried the king's sister, releasing him as abruptly as she had embraced him. "I'll get ready for the journey, and you needn't stay to watch."

Araton pulled his wife toward the small open window, so that the dim light from the crystal sea fell on her face. The brown princess shrank helplessly under his rough grip, and she realized, with a sinking heart, that her impulsive kiss had been a grave mistake. She would have given much to take it back.

"You don't make parting easy, Zista," he hissed in her ear between clenched teeth. "You're a foolish little thing—you've no idea what game is being played here. I regret what I meant to do—and now I'll stay. I'll drink the wine before a stronger hand can tear the cup from my lips. I've no wish to play

the noble man any longer, not now that I know how your kisses taste! Confess—you mean to deceive me, you little wicked beast! Confess that you love another, and that you plan to run away the moment you can. If you don't, I'll take you here and now as my rightful possession—and take your life along with your love, which by the king's command belongs to me. What do I care for your foolish wishes and dreams? Come, Zista—I'll tell the guards not to disturb us."

The king's sister bit her lips until they bled and fought against the man's raw, animal strength. But Araton's hand clamped around her arm like a vise, unyielding.

"I will confess," gasped the girl, her voice breaking. "I'll confess everything, Araton—only let me go!"

"Well—who is it?" asked the prince, suddenly calmer, and he released her. Zista wrestled with herself. Her eyes darted wildly toward the door.

"You won't tell me?" said Araton darkly.

"I can't, my lord! I can't!" she cried in despair, the words trembling from her small red mouth, from which a drop of blood rolled slowly down to her delicate chin.

"Why can't you?" demanded the prince harshly—but already there was a note of unwilling pity in his voice.

"You'd kill me if I told you—and you'd kill him too—and so I won't tell!" she burst out, resolute. "I'd sooner give myself to you willingly—and then you may kill me afterward. Take me, Araton—but think no more of the other. I'm your wife, Araton, yours and no one else's. Once I've been yours, all foolish hopes and all happiness on this earth will be over. Here I am, Araton—why don't you take me?"

Araton stepped back from her and looked at her in astonishment, shaking his head. Is Jochaan not to be envied, that lucky slave? he thought bitterly. How rich that servant is—and how poor the rich prince!

"I see now I'll have to take you bound," he said grimly.

"Yes, bind me, Araton—do what you will, but ask me no more. I'll never answer you, even if you have me tortured!"

"And once I've bound you, little wildcat, I'll have to take Sperr away as well. He might get it into his head to bite through his mistress's ropes!"

Zista collapsed. Sperr had been her only comfort, her only hope. In the deepest corner of her heart she had counted on him—and now even that escape was cut off. She saw clearly at last: Araton would not be deceived.

Ah, she was no longer free! The marriage she had entered that very day before the king and the entire priesthood—her union with Prince Araton—bound her now to fidelity toward her husband. She had pledged that fidelity without hesitation, and now, on the very first day, she wanted to break it. Tears poured from her eyes.

"If only you knew how wretched and unhappy I am, Araton!" she sobbed. "But far more unhappy than wicked—whether you believe it or not!"

I know that better than you yourself, thought the prince, with a quiet, softened smile in his heart. But I won't make it so easy for you, my sly little wife. If only you knew what welcome message you carry in your hair, what pardon for your guilt! It's a good thing you can't read, foolish child—and that it will be Jochaan who first reads my words when he finds them hidden among your dark braids. You must suffer a little for your deceit; that way, my generosity will not weigh so heavily upon you later when you think of me. But enough now—I can hardly bear to see you torment yourself any longer.

He gently stroked her tear-soaked cheeks.

"You disgust me!" she burst out from the depths of her heart, though she was certain she would be beaten for such insolence. But Araton only broke into amused laughter.

"At least that's honest and direct!" he said cheerfully. "I can see that you can't be any more honest, since you're a girl who can't find her own way out of matters of the heart without a guiding hand. Come, give me your hand, Zista! I loved you as a peasant lad from the highlands of my homeland loves his girl! You must admit, that's rather strange for a prince of the Abessian Isles. Now I'll share the fate of all princes—to remain unloved. Perhaps it isn't so important after all; we may imagine it is, but a prince surely has greater concerns in times like these than mourning over a girl's love. And you?"

"I am your thing, your property, my lord," replied the king's sister, brokenly. "Do with me as you will."

"Have you suddenly lost your will entirely?" Araton laughed, regarding the once-wild creature now subdued. "Come, Zista, give me your hand—yes, turn it over, I want to see the pale inside, the part I used to love to kiss whenever I thought of you. Will you think of me when you stroke another man's head with it—and when another kisses it? Don't startle, Zista, that's mere swordplay with words! A pity we can't be honest with one another. Well, I've tormented you

enough now, beautiful little bride of another. You don't know how hard it was for me just now when you kissed me. You'll be more cautious with that mouth in future, I hope, or things might go badly one day—as nearly today! Now it's over. Don't look at me so fearfully! Look kindly at me once more, Zista, so that I don't carry away only the ugly image of a spiteful woman. How beautiful it might have been, had there not been one—whom I also love. Ah yes, you don't understand me! I'm mad, like Jochaan. That's what comes of spending too long with him on the holy mountain. Farewell, my brown carrier-dove! You need do no wrong—I've made sure of that—and I'm terribly proud of my own magnanimity, though I feel almost foolish for it! Now make sure you finish getting ready. It's already taken too long. I ride ahead to Nordland, which I would gladly have shown you."

Araton stood up swiftly and went to the door. Without turning back, he bowed his tall form beneath the low lintel and stepped outside. He stood in the open, before his town residence in Tulma.

The host of warriors of the Arer—the fair-eyed race of his lineage—pressed in teeming ranks across courtyard and street. Townsmen and women gazed curiously at the splendid royal commander, who was to ride forth this time in the king's stead to defend the distant northern borders, many days' journeys away, against the desperate onslaught of the freezing nomad hordes from the eternal ice.

But only subdued cries of greeting met the beloved prince, the queen's brother—for all eyes strayed again and again toward the dreadful sight of Mount Peri, the fire-spewing mountain, which though veiled in clouds, still cast its glowing light into the darkened streets of the city.

Dull explosions rumbled from the distant heights, and the earth trembled faintly, as though it crouched in fear of the dreadful force that hung threateningly in the smoke- and mist-choked air. A tormented moaning welled up from the depths—uncanny, nerve-shattering—so that breath halted involuntarily in ghastly terror before the inevitable that seemed to draw near with an implacable, creeping pilgrim's step.

In dull horror, wide-opened eyes stared toward the glowing radiance of the gläserne Meer—the glassy sea—whose movement had, in recent weeks, visibly quickened, throwing all careful reckoning of time into confusion; pale light and black darkness now chased each other in a bewildering, feverish succession.

The earth no longer shook in short, violent jolts as it once had; instead it swayed in trembling undulations, like a viscous mire beneath which seethed and boiled unseen forces. From its bowels came the groaning of some

primordial, tortured monster, and from deep fissures here and there rose foul fumes and hot vapors into the poisoned air.

Araton cast a brief glance around him.

Jochaan had been right—the time was nearly fulfilled.

Before the prince stood sick and starving figures: soldiers with their throats bandaged—faithful men who, despite plague and illness, still meant to ride with their leader to Nordland; women with pale children at their withered, slack breasts; greedy, vacant faces everywhere.

Curses and threats echoed, some muffled, some shouted openly, from the dark alleys—bony fists raised in desperate fury toward the noble warrior.

Famine.

What use had the king found in the mad invention of the high priest Nephat—the mark of the wounded beast—that had been branded upon the foreheads and right hands of the merchants, so that no one might trade unless he bore the mark of the beast? Araton saw them standing there, the merchants with the mark upon their brows—those alone who were permitted to buy and sell—and who did not, because the king demanded too much of them! It was no longer worth undertaking long journeys when, at home, the endless earthquakes made the houses collapse and the lava-streams of the fire-mountains surged through the streets of the land. Better to stay home, make use of the time, and drink and gamble away what little remained of their former wealth.

This is the collapse, thought the prince, unmoved. It no longer matters what becomes of it. I shall never see this city again. I will do what Jochaan calls the highest duty of a prince—to stand at his post and serve while it is still day, for the night may come faster than men can imagine: the eternal night creeping in like a thief. But he who overcomes shall inherit all things, and the Great Spirit shall wipe away every tear, and death shall be no more, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain—for the first things have passed away!

Did not Jochaan, the wondrous one, say this?—Jochaan the servant, who was already a builder of the new earth and the new heaven before they had come; who was a priest of the Great Spirit, unknown to men, whose hand he felt behind the storm of the glassy sea.

Slowly Araton rode out of the city of Tulma. The columns fell in silently behind their leader. Simple carts with block-wheels rumbled and creaked, drawn by coal-black buffalo, in a long line at the rear. With bowed heads, the poor, bestialized people rode toward the coming doom—one prepared not by an enemy, but by the very law of overpowering nature, whose secret

colossal forces tear planets against one another, erase nations from the memory of time, and permit only the strongest and wisest to reenter the paradise of the new earth.

At the royal court, high above the city on the mountain slope, stood Galmon, the old warrior.

For the first time in his long service, he did not ride to war against the nation's enemies. His place was now at the king's side; and for that, though he would gladly have ridden with Araton, he bore no grudge against fate.

Tutmon was still ill. He had sent word to the prince that the wedding feast had exhausted him, and he regretted being unable to receive Araton before his departure.

Sorrowfully, the friend of the master builder stood beside the old field commander. As the two soldiers exchanged brief words of farewell, Araton gazed longingly toward the royal palace. Then, from the hall, a white figure with a veiled head slipped forth, walking slowly and unsteadily toward the prince of the Arer.

"Sister!" said the warrior, shaken.

Galmon stepped back. In his weathered face a spasm flickered—like weeping. The times had grown dreadful. Why could he not, an old man, die—so as not to see all this misery?

Araton leapt from the saddle and wrapped his arms around the shoulders of the proud yet bowed woman.

"I am better—much better, brother," she assured him quickly. "But do not touch me, Araton—it is better and safer for you. You must keep your strength for the long journey to Nordland. You know I tend the king, my dear lord. My illness is not as painful as his, and I think I shall soon recover."

Tears sprang into the eyes of the queen's brother.

"Aramut, Aramut!" he said in a voice struggling in vain against the grief that threatened to overwhelm him. "Is this farewell? And must I leave you behind—you, whom I love more than all else on earth?"

"Think of Zista, Araton," smiled the queen gently. "Be happy with her, and always remember—a sister can never take the place of a beloved wife."

The prince stroked his horse's rough neck in embarrassment and looked long into the queen's eyes, uncertain whether to speak the painful truth that weighed on him.

"I have given Zista to Jochaan," he said at last, his voice subdued. "I braided a letter into her hair—the deed of gift—so that the offering may stand lawful and unquestioned. You may, then, think of the little king's sister in a few days' time, as she climbs toward the holy mountain. Zista knows nothing of this secret arrangement, but she is determined to leave me and flee to Jochaan as soon as the chance arises. I have trained Sperr so that he knows the path up the mountain perfectly, and I know he will carry her safely there when the time comes. I had to tell you this before I depart, Aramut, for I know it will wound you as deeply as it wounds me. For Jochaan loves the king's sister. You must know this, so that you will be strong enough to bear what must be borne. Everything can be borne, since you and I are granted the strength to hold our necks stiff when fate strikes."

The princess stood motionless. Nothing betrayed how deeply her brother's words had struck her.

"My place is at Tutmon's side," she said calmly and with pride.

"Queen…" whispered her brother, bending low over the hand of the pale, ailing woman.

"When you return, Araton, time will have seen to it that pain has lost its poison," said the woman bravely, laying her pale, thin right hand upon the young prince's head.

"Jochaan says I shall not return," he continued. "And I know he is right. I shall not return. The time is fulfilled, and the downfall of the earth is near."

"Jochaan is hard in his truth," replied the queen. "Yet I too believe him—as one believes a man whose spirit towers above us like the summit of the holy mountain above all the hills of the Abessian Isles; as one believes a good man whom one loves—as a bride trusts her bridegroom."

Araton drew his sister's head close and kissed her eyes with passion.

"Farewell, beloved Aramut," he said warmly, trying to conceal his pain. "I will send you word through Jochaan's doves whenever I can, if I live. And if I must die, it will not be so terrible—for I shall know that once more I have kissed my Aramut, the noble queen and proudest woman these eyes have ever beheld."

Araton mounted his horse. At the gate, old Galmon stood waiting, his lips trembling as he looked up at the young prince. Araton reached down his hand and tried to laugh lightly—but it would not come.

He spurred his horse and rode swiftly after his men, into the dark mist that, torn by the roaring storm, streamed eastward along the eternal cloud-road.

Only a few hours after Araton's departure, a smaller troop passed by King Tutmon's court—riders, wagons, and pack animals in long columns. In their midst swayed a veiled palanquin carrying the little king's sister, who stole glances from behind the curtains of coarse gray wool toward the queen.

Aramut still stood at the gate, her face white as she gazed into the distance—toward the heights where her brother now rode along the pass between the fiery mountain Peri and the holy mountain, riding toward his fate.

Zista tried to wave, but the queen did not see her; her eyes were dimmed with grief—for Araton and for Jochaan.

The brown bearers' feet stumbled uncertainly over the trembling, restless ground; it was no easy task to carry the litter of the young Princess Araton without faltering, for the earth jolted and rocked with an eerie, ever-intensifying rhythm. The rough road led uphill, winding between the holy mountain and the volcano Peri, over a narrow pass.

Fearfully, riders and footmen stared at the blazing glare of the flaming mountain. Suffocating, sulfurous smoke swept with rain and mist down the slopes in the storm; a damp ash-rain fell thickly, settling sticky and stinking upon faces and clothes.

Breathless and silent, the troop climbed the mountain, heads drawn in, lips pressed tight, raising their leather shields against the stones that fell among the ashes—stones that came whistling from the racing cloud mass above, clattering sharply and thudding into the soft ground all around.

Zista noticed little of this. She sat within her litter, arms around the neck of her wolfhound, who lay alert, ears pricked to the voice of his little mistress, and who distrustfully poked his pointed muzzle through the curtain into the foul-smelling fog.

The girl no longer wept. The farewell words of her newly wedded husband still echoed puzzlingly in her ears. Araton knew of her love for Jochaan—that much was certain. How he had found out no longer mattered. He had set guards over her, yet the terrible threat to bind her in chains and take her by force—and to take her faithful Sperr away—he had not carried out. She could not understand him. There seemed little logic in his behavior. He had said he had "arranged it so that she need commit no wrong." What could that mean? She was determined to commit that wrong—to flee to Jochaan, whether he would receive her or not! If only he would redeem the promise of the tiny, foolish cork! If he only did that, she would see what followed. She had already tested her

power over men that day with Araton—and it had nearly led to disaster. Would that same disaster come true with Jochaan?

"Sperr, do you know the way to the holy mountain?" she whispered coaxingly into the tall, pointed ears of the hound. The warm breath of her voice displeased him; one ear flicked suddenly back and struck her cheek with a soft slap.

For once, however, punishment did not follow—though Zista surely would not have let it pass had not the joyful thumping of the dog's tail on the floor of the litter told her that Sperr had understood and answered in his own way.

"That's your good fortune, my son," said Zista with mock dignity, tightening her affectionate grip around the dog's neck.

Then she listened intently. Amid the roaring of the fiery mountain came at times a dull, howling tone—rising quickly, whipping at the nerves, and ending with a muffled thud.

What could that be? A chill ran down Zista's spine, and she felt the sudden urge to be outside in the open air. A heavy pressure seemed to settle on her lungs; she could scarcely breathe. Sperr coughed, twitching his ears in discomfort when the howling rose near, and growled when it ended with that harsh, striking sound.

Suddenly there was a violent jolt—the litter tilted and crashed roughly to the ground, swaying back and forth in the violent quake like a small ship caught in the surf between rocks. The king's sister thrust her head through the curtain, for she had heard a half-choked cry and, just before that, a loud crack, before the carrying-chair was so roughly dropped.

A young captain—the commander of Prince Araton's retinue—urged his frightened, snorting horse forward.

"What has happened?" Zista asked sharply.

"A stone from the Peri struck one of the bearers, my lady," the officer answered coolly and composedly, as befitted a soldier. "The man is dead. It was a great burning rock that hit him. I wish we were through the pass already, for the bombs from the fire-mountain fall thicker every moment, and I do not know—"

The captain ducked and broke off.

A few more stones whistled through the air and struck with dull thuds into the soft turf, splashing up water and spattering the riders with mud.

Zista leapt from the litter like a cat and knelt beside the fallen bearer.

"Yes, he is dead—the poor man," Zista said softly and with pity, though he was but a worthless slave-beast of her husband. "Shall we bury him, so that he does not lie here by the roadside for the mountain vultures to devour?"

The captain stared at his little mistress in horror and raised his hand imploringly.

"Bury him, Princess?" he asked in astonishment. "We should be glad and thankful if we can get over the pass and leave the fire-mountain behind us unharmed. Look, my lady, see how the stones pour down through the mist like a hailstorm! The whole air is filled with fiery missiles. I beg you, get back into the litter so we can move on."

The young captain's eyes flickered with fear. He looked pleadingly at his small mistress while his right hand held open the flap of the palanquin.

Zista laughed at the soldier before following his inviting gesture and stepping back inside.

He's afraid! she thought with satisfaction. If only he'd just leave me behind on the pass and run for his life—that's exactly what I wish would happen.

"Is it far to the top of the pass?" she asked from behind the curtains before the column started moving again.

"Not much farther, my lady—but we must hurry," came the strained reply. The litter was lifted, and the journey continued in breathless haste.

Although the glassy sea had darkened the sun, the travelers hurried on gasping, for the burning Peri provided enough—if dreadful—light to see the ruined mountain road.

Now and then, fiery stones struck into the marching columns; cries of pain echoed near and far through the howling storm. Here and there, riders and footmen fell and lay by the wayside, forgotten. Human feet trampled over the fallen in wild panic, racing to reach the northeastern bend of the pass road. Whole wagons, with their teams of black buffalo, were left abandoned—no one caring. The long column stretched thin and broke apart into scattered groups, each seeking its own path out of the hell of the fire-mountain. Some even turned back, attempting to return to Tulma.

Zista pushed aside the curtains of her litter and looked out intently. The rain had almost ceased—which was no surprise at the onset of winter—but in its place a thick ash-dust fell from the dark sky, driven by the west wind. Dense billows of foul, poisonous fumes rolled every few minutes down from the mountain, only to be torn apart again by the screaming gale. At times, the smoke lifted, and the burning Peri came into view—its summit glowing white-hot, thrust like a flaming spear into the blood-red storm clouds that whipped past. The flanks of the mountain were split open, and from abyssal rifts poured streams of light—gushing forth like silver springs, no longer thick and sluggish as before, but leaping and cascading in torrents. Gigantic rocks danced like corks upon the flaming flood and melted away in the seething heart-blood of Mother Earth.

Again, glowing stones came whistling down like sirens, striking the ground just ahead of the rushing party, rolling between the legs of terrified horses, hissing as they struck, and scorching the grass to a bright, blistered yellow. Merciless lashes drove oxen and horses to ever faster pace.

With dreadful swiftness, wide rivers of fire came surging down the mountain, filling and overflowing whole valleys as if they were narrow gullies—joining one another and rolling onward like a colossal serpent from the belly of the earth, come to devour all that lived.

The forested slope of Peri burst into towering sheets of flame, so that the pass road was as bright as day, and the trembling cliffs of the holy mountain glowed in the infernal light. Tower-high above the jungle crowns the destruction thundered into the valley with the speed of a storm, with a roar unbearable to human ears. On the northern side too the molten torrents rushed downward, foaming like gigantic mountain streams, leaping high through deep gorges like monstrous waterfalls. Around the immovable boulders they churned pale and ghostly, as if the waves of water themselves were writhing around defiant, unyielding rocks upon the shore of the sea.

Zista's eyes went rigid. Her small hands clenched in the thick, wolf-gray fur of Sperr. The terror of merciless death amid this blazing wilderness now seized her as well. The hot, stifling smoke pressed down upon her chest until she could hardly breathe.

The pass road buckled and twisted beneath her as if convulsed by colossal, mysterious forces—forces that could not arise solely from the burning earth but seemed to come from without, from beyond, where the glassy sea released the sun again and it sped like a gigantic, feverish fireball toward the horizon.

The bearers stumbled, tried once more to lift the litter, fell again, and at last gave up their futile efforts. With a crash, the chair struck the ground and

overturned; its thin frame burst apart like glass. The little king's sister sat wedged among the boards, kicking and struggling to free herself—but the hard, splintered planks held her fast no matter how she twisted and writhed.

Sperr had been quicker than his mistress; he already sat outside among the wreckage, howling miserably into the smoke-choked, roaring air through which rocks and stones hissed and whirred like monstrous, ugly flies. Then, recalling his trapped mistress, the hound began his rescue—scratching with his paws, gnawing at the wood with his predator's teeth.

When Zista finally crouched trembling beside the shattered litter, she realized she was alone with Sperr. The captain likely had not even noticed what had happened—or perhaps he already lay dead upon the pass road. Who could tell? The riders had surely galloped on in blind panic to save their lives, and the slave-bearers had followed, for the approaching stream of fire rolled unstoppably toward the narrow path, and the very rocks trembled and swayed so that movement itself became nearly impossible.

The young princess crawled out from her furs and rose to her feet. The dog sat beside her, barking ceaselessly, pressing his broad back against her legs. The dreadful flood of fire came surging closer, blazing and clear as glass, cascading over the last ridge. The trees on its back split apart with sharp cracks and burst into flame even before the wave of heat engulfed them.

The little king's sister could think no longer. In despair, she flung both arms around her dog's massive neck and clasped her legs tightly about his back. Just hold on, only hold on! said an inner voice born of that instinct for survival shared by man and beast alike.

Sperr set off at a steady, tireless trot, vanishing into the smoke and fog toward where the holy mountain lifted its layered sandstone shoulders into the clouds. The hound moved over ledges and narrow paths no human foot could ever master—crossing them with the innate care and mountain-born skill of a half-wild creature whose true home was among the crags.

On the pass road behind them lay the collapsed troop of men and women, with horses, mules, oxen, and wagons—suffocated by poisonous gases, scorched by the fiery heat of the mountain. The white wave of molten flood surged steep and high over them, erasing every trace that the retinue of Prince Araton had ever ridden northward.

Only upon a lonely height of the pass—where the fiery torrent had divided—stood, blackened and half-charred, the shattered litter of the little princess, like an island amid a sea of flame. Only a few hundred paces away, the jagged ends of the lava streams crackled where, at the knife-edge of the pass,

they had split their course to pour down both sides of the mountains into the valleys below.

Then rain began again, hissing upon the scorched slopes, wrapping the mountains in white, boiling steam. Torrents of mud struck the pass with slapping sounds; streams of boiling water toyed with the remains of the delicate litter, sweeping them into a hollow beside the road, where they rocked to and fro in a murky, sulfur-stinking pool under the beating storm.

Swiftly, the glassy sea dipped beneath the horizon, racing breathlessly around the earth and flaring up in the west like a hunted beast. The ancient star of the world turned on in the rhythm of its hours, casting its thick, immense shadow-cone into infinite space. Growing from a crescent to near fullness, the vast lunar companion sank into that shadow, passed through it in frantic flight, and lowered itself toward the eastern horizon—only to rise again in the west as a gigantic torch, as if to light the funeral of the dying Earth.

Fleeting twilight swept over mountains and valleys, alternating with black darkness shot through by steep, flickering pillars of fire that flared from Peri and the volcanic chains of the islands—an eerie light over burning jungles and flowing, smoking seas of lava, besieged by storms of lightning whose thunder was drowned out by the drumbeat of collapsing mountain cones.

Like furious stallions, the merciless rivers of flame galloped down into the valleys, and the riders upon them wore fiery, blue, and sulfurous armor; the heads of the steeds were like the heads of lions, and from their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone. And a third of mankind was slain by the fire and smoke and brimstone that came from their mouths. The fountains of the abyss burst open, gushing forth like crystalline mountain springs over the dancing slopes and trembling hillsides—scorching, pitiless, consuming all.

Rock clefts closed over red-glowing chasms, while new ones opened, spewing torrents of destruction into the valleys of men. From the west the storm roared through the pass, driving the poisonous vapors before it; torrents of rain quenched the thinning streams of lava upon the heights and hissed steaming across the hardening stone.

And just above the tormented earth, the glassy sea swept swiftly through the clouds—poised to plunge down, for its time was near.

Edmund Kiß

The Sickle

A rider came trotting on a stumbling steed, making a wide detour along the slopes of the holy mountain toward the mountain pass. When fissures and ravines barred his way, he leapt from the saddle and led his snorting horse by the reins. There he met a man who held in his crippled hand a sword of bright metal—a sword of black, unknown substance, the same kind that Prince Araton possessed.

"Who are you?" the rider asked.

"I am Jochaan, the King's master builder."

A joyful light appeared in the face of the stranger.

"I come from Prince Araton," he said, "and I seek Princess Zista, his consort, whom he married before departing for the North. She followed my lord not far behind, with the retinue that was also to march northward. If you are Jochaan—the man of the holy mountain—then help me find her."

The scholar planted his sword upright in the ground before him and gave no answer. His eyes were closed. He seemed not to have understood the rider's plea to seek the princess.

"Do you see the sickle of the glassy sea?" Jochaan asked slowly, heavily. "Do you see the sharp sickle?"

"No, Jochaan, it's behind the clouds," the rider replied uneasily, glancing up fearfully at the darkened sky.

"But I see it," said Jochaan, his eyelids still shut, speaking as though in a deep, tormented dream. "I see Him who wields it. Strike, O eternal Power, strike with thy sickle upon the earth and reap! For the time to reap has come, and the harvest of the earth is dry. Swing thy sharp scythe and cut the grapes of the vine of the earth, for her clusters are ripe! Cast them into the winepress of the world, that the blood may flow from the press even unto the horses' bridles!—Destroyed is the great city; in a single hour such wealth is laid waste! And all the shipmasters, and the multitude of those who worked upon the sea, stood afar off and cried as they saw the smoke of her burning; and they cast ashes upon their heads and cried, weeping and lamenting, saying: Woe, woe, the great city, wherein all who had ships in the sea were made rich by her merchandise—for in one hour she is desolate!"

The stranger crossed himself, trembling.

The King's master builder seemed mad. So it was true, then, what the campfires whispered of him. There he stood, strange and rigid, eyes closed, lips pressed thin, his gray hair whipping in the storm like silver ribbons.

"Yes, the city must have burned, Jochaan," the rider ventured uncertainly, trying to continue the strange conversation. "But I am looking for Lady Zista—she left the city long before Peri burst apart. Her train must have passed this very height. The prince is deeply troubled, for right behind us, as we rode ahead, the flood of terror poured across the road. We barely escaped with our lives. My lord would gladly have gone back himself, but he could not abandon his troops in their panic, or they would have scattered. So he sent me—to find her, and to ask your aid if I met you."

"Who is Zista?" the scholar asked with a strange smile that sent a chill down the rider's spine. "She too is part of the earth that is being harvested. Who can know whether it is already done, or still to come? Why do you ask after her? Why does Araton trouble himself? Tell the prince she is in good keeping—but she can no longer come to him, for the way to him has grown too long—longer, far longer than the road that will soon part Jochaan from his friend, when the time is fulfilled."

"Why do you keep your eyes closed when you speak to me, Jochaan?" the rider asked anxiously. "Do you not wish to tell the truth? Can you not bear to look at me?"

"I can speak both truth and falsehood with open eyes, if I wish," laughed the King's master builder, fixing the stranger from Araton's host with great, shining eyes. "Tell Araton that his lady is lost to him. Tell him she is with me, that she is on the holy mountain—say whatever you please—but do not say that she is dead, for she is not dead. That is all I know, stranger. Let Araton go where his duty calls him—northward, to the fortresses built on the white stone. Perhaps he will soon have more to occupy his mind than a woman lost to him before he ever truly won her."

The rider's gaze swept the smoking pass as far as his eyes could reach. Hardened, black lava bordered the narrow ridge where the two men stood beside a small pool. Floating upon it still were the remnants of the litter.

"What lies there in the water?" asked the soldier, leaping down to investigate. A moment later, he looked up at the King's master builder in horror.

"It is the litter of Lady Araton," said Jochaan.

"Then you have lied—she is dead!" cried the man, dragging the pitiful fragments of wood up to the shore.

The scholar drew a leopard skin from beneath his tunic and held it high in the air.

"If you insist, then tell the prince she is dead. Perhaps that message will please him more than the one I gave you—that she is with Jochaan upon the holy mountain. But I know better."

"But do not forget to tell him," said Jochaan, "that she is lost to him."

The warrior of Araton climbed back up to where Jochaan stood.

"What of the pelt? Where did you find it?" he asked quickly. The scholar pointed toward the holy mountain.

"I found it while descending from my solitary caves," he said. "There—behind that great rock now half-hidden in the mist—I found the panther skin the princess once wore. How could it have come there? She must have dropped it while fleeing from the fire of the burning mountain. I know no more, for I did not find her myself. And because I did not find her, I am certain she is lost to the prince. She would not be found, man!—But you do not understand. Your lord, however, will understand when you tell him. Perhaps a shadow of hidden sorrow will flit across his face—watch him well—but he will praise you, not blame you, for not bringing her back, though now you know she lives and is on the holy mountain. Would you go seek her there, in the cloud-wrapped heights? Do you truly think you would find her, when she would not even let herself be found by me?"

"We could bring men from Tulma to help us search," suggested the soldier.

"Go down to Tulma, fool! The city is wiped from the Book of the Living, and seas of fire now flow where the dwellings of men once stood."

"I too shall go down," said Jochaan, "and see what has become of those who escaped the fury of the fire; though I fear there will not be many. And those who remain will soon despair from hunger and thirst. Do you truly believe that in Tulma there still flows a single spring whose water can be drunk? Can men catch the rain when the ash-hail from the burning mountains has made it bitter and poisonous? No, loyal servant of Prince Araton — this is no time to search for a person who has sought shelter somewhere in the mountains and perhaps found safety there. I will tell you no more. Search alone; I will not help you, for I have other tasks."

"You do know where she is, Jochaan!" cried the soldier threateningly.

The King's master builder said nothing; he looked at the warrior with a strange, almost amused smile.

"You must come with me and show me the way up the holy mountain," the other demanded, answering Jochaan's smile with a dark and resolute frown. "And if you won't come of your own will, I'll force you."

"Then force me," said the scholar lightly, still smiling.

The soldier placed his heavy hand on Jochaan's shoulder and shoved him toward the mountain slope. Then he loosened the stone axe in his belt and reached for the master builder's sword.

"That will do," said Jochaan calmly — and with his crippled left arm he thrust the startled warrior hard in the chest so that he staggered backward. The black iron sword whistled through the air and struck the wooden shaft of the axe, splitting it clean in two so that only the useless handle remained in the soldier's grasp.

"Now then, be reasonable, man," said Jochaan kindly, breaking into a quiet laugh as the poor fellow crouched, resigned, expecting the fatal blow. "You needn't tell your prince that I broke your battle axe — that would be unpleasant for a soldier, especially when a cripple was the one who did it. Have a new one made before you stand before him. But tell your lord the whole truth, even if you don't understand it. Araton will recognize it at once. Tell him: The princess lives and is safe with Jochaan, if it proves true that the holy mountain is a place of refuge when the time is fulfilled. Have you understood me?"

The soldier stared in disbelief at the formidable scholar who had defied him so easily, though his arms were twisted and crippled — arms that should have been useless in a fight. Yet, after what he had just witnessed in that brief instant, he thought it unwise to continue the struggle. There was also something disconcerting in the master builder's calm cheerfulness, as though he found their confrontation a good joke rather than a matter of life and death. So he turned without a word, went to his horse — which sniffed the bitter, poisoned grass without eating, though it was thin and worn — took the reins, and made his way back down the path he had come.

The hoofbeats of the prince's messenger soon faded northward into the mist.

Jochaan, meanwhile, cast a joyful look up toward the heights of his mountain, veiled in steam and cloud. He raised his hand toward the smoky air as if greeting someone whom fate had guided to his lonely heights.

"She is quick and young," thought Jochaan — almost speaking aloud, as lonely men often do who are unused to human company. "If things are as I suspect, I'll find the little princess in my caves when I return from my wandering. She'll not lose patience; she'll wait for me! Fate has barred the road that led northward to her husband, to whom she was bound by human law. Now the glassy sea has entrusted her to another — to a slave, not a prince. But the slave will keep and guard her, and he'll not ask whether it's wrong to take the friend's wife who never truly belonged to him! He wished to take her with him, as I advised — and that counsel was honestly meant. But the child willed otherwise, and the glassy sea has helped her and me alike. She must have met me, for there's only one narrow path that leads to my heights, and there's no way to avoid a meeting there unless one hides among the rocks. And she was on that path. So she hid herself from me — held the dog's muzzle shut, so that he wouldn't bark to greet me! I found the tracks of a dog near the panther pelt, tracks not yet erased by storm or ash, sheltered by the still eastern slope of the mountain. Behind a boulder they must have rested — Zista and her hound. And that hiding place lay right beside my way! She let me pass so that I would not find her — and so that I would not show her the road northward, which she does not wish to take. Wait for me now, little queen of the new earth — fearless, splendid creature of humankind — savior and beloved!"

Jochaan stretched his mighty limbs and, with a bright cry, raised his crippled arms high into the air.

"You shall give me the king who will shepherd the new earth with an iron rod, little king's sister! I hold in my hand the black metal that will make mankind powerful—and the one who knows how to wield that power shall be king. You and I—we shall bow beneath the weight of the glassy sea and not despair when others howl in terror. Unarmed, you ride upon your faithful Sperr through the dreadful mountain gorges, past the wild beasts whose very sight makes men's hearts quake—upward to your true home, to the man who is but a slave of the king like a thousand others, yet who will be a king of the new earth beneath the new heaven. Whoever endures to the end shall be crowned, little slave-bride! And we shall endure.

"And what of your solitude now, Jochaan—that solitude you need to master the final things? Do I not from this day walk another path, one that leads toward human power and earthly happiness? Which path is the right one? So thinks a man who means to act. O men, how small is Jochaan, who thought himself greater than all others!"

The king's master builder hung the iron sword at his side and made his cautious way down into the valley, walking close along the edge of the glowing lava stream until the heat grew too great and forced him higher into the mountains.

Jochaan gazed into the dimly flaming depths, and there was almost a gleam of triumph in his eyes. Had the poor slave spoken too much—or too little? And you fools, you hollow-headed men, empty as the sacred beast of Tulma, you called him mad and smiled pityingly when he warned and threatened, trying to awaken you.

Down below, the deep rivers of molten fire ran endlessly, fed from the torn bowels of the volcano, roaring through the once-fertile valley where the great city had stood—Tulma, the proud, the only one. Tulma the rich, with its temple buildings of precious wood and ivory, with its granaries and storehouses, its sheltered harbor and the proud merchant fleet of its traders and shipmasters, with the sleek, swift warships he himself, Jochaan, had built for the king.

The scholar sat down on the foul grass and listened to the raging forces of nature all around him—above his head, and deep below in the womb of the earth.

How the sharp sickle of the Great Spirit had mowed! How the scythe had cut among the dull-witted pleasure seekers of the great city!

Not far from here—only a little lower down—must the king's hall have stood. Yet though it had been built high above Tulma on the mountainside, the fiery torrents had reached and devoured it. The valley was filled to the brim with red, molten flood and had left nothing that human skill had conceived or built. Far out into the seething sea the whirl of fire must have reached, to cool its rage in the water. Through the infernal roar of the thunderous volcanoes, Jochaan thought he could still hear the hissing and boiling of that distant sea.

Lonely and empty stretched the scorched, stinking slope of the holy mountain.

"Now I sit here and wait for men," thought the scholar, "and must speak with myself because the others who might share a cheerful conversation are gone! It seems almost as if I alone remain, and that the people of Tulma have been burned away with their huts and palaces—glowing cinders dancing upon the swaying, fiery tide—tiny black and gray fragments of the harvest of the earth, which had ripened to be reaped. The time is terribly near when the final thing must come—something beyond human strength to bear, when men must see it with their eyes. Perhaps the beasts are better off. Must I too become a beast, as they call the king's poor slaves—dull and without hope—in order to endure what I must witness upon my mountain, with seeing eyes, with listening ears, and a clear, thinking mind? Better off are those who need not think in the final hour, who have no eyes to see and no ears to hear—for it will be a torment without equal, to think and to hear, alone among the beasts."

Long Jochaan sat in the grass upon the slope of the holy mountain, rocked and shaken by the waves of earthquake that struck the island in endless, demonic rhythm.

"Why do I not fear?" he wondered. "Am I not a man like the others? Do not my nerves tremble beneath my skin as theirs do? Why can I laugh when I see the rocks dance and the trickling lifeblood of the earth welling from unknown depths? Perhaps the people are right when they say I am mad—that I feel neither joy nor pain, neither happiness nor sorrow, because I always laugh when others believe they must weep. Madmen laugh amid destruction and peril—that is true—they laugh because they do not recognize their doom."

"Perhaps I do not truly perceive suffering either," Jochaan mused, "but look upon it as one looks at some dreadful picture hanging dead upon a wall. And yet—it may be that I am the madman and the others are sane; of course, that I cannot judge myself. Strange that I should think of it only today—today, when I have resolved to walk human paths of love and ambition, paths I had never trod because they once seemed unworthy of me. What a woman can make of a man! Her hand is so small and weak, yet she has turned the rudder of my life—and that just before the great end I have feverishly awaited as a revelation! I might have expected that with it the madness would fall from me like a shell, but it seems it has not. So man can be in love, ambitious, and mad all at once.

"I have always thought that the Great Spirit must possess an inexhaustible store of humor, with which He drenches His creatures, whether they like it or not. Here He has set the mad, ambitious Jochaan down in the grass, strutting like a capercaillie in his mating dance. How He must laugh, out there in His unfathomable vastness, at the master builder Jochaan!"

The scholar did not notice the figure that detached itself from the shadow of the storm-tossed jungle behind him and cautiously approached. It was a man with a bandaged head and in a filthy robe that had once been white but was now gray and grimy with volcanic ash. In his hand he carried a heavy stone knife, the kind priests used for sacrifices.

The stranger crouched behind a clump of brush at the forest's edge and watched Jochaan, as if uncertain what to do. More than once his measuring gaze judged the distance between them, and he weighed the knife in his hand, playing with it. But he came to no decision—whether to throw it or not.

At last, he seemed to have chosen another course: he hung the weapon carefully on his belt, then stepped from his hiding place and walked slowly, hesitantly toward Jochaan.

"Well, well—the sorcerer of the holy mountain!" he said aloud as he stood close behind him. "Your Great Spirit must have great power indeed, to preserve His disciple where thousands had to die."

The scholar lifted his head and looked calmly into the stranger's eyes, without surprise. A faint, pitying smile flickered over his furrowed features.

"Ah, Nephat! So it is you—the priest of the sacred beast, spiritual ruler of these islands," nodded the king's master builder. "If we two alone have survived this destruction, then fate has played a poor joke—for we must now be reconciled, though water and fire can never be reconciled, as we can plainly see and hear down there. Otherwise, one of us must kill the other, to put an end to the jest. But I propose peace, as best we can manage it, Nephat—if only because I was never truly your enemy. You merely angered me, that's all, and I will try to mend my ways and laugh at you and your kind no longer—though in doing so I deprive myself of one of life's few pleasures, for which I ought to thank you to my dying day.

"Still, that isn't quite true, Nephat! I never laughed at you, only at those who believed your nonsense because they were afraid. Fear, I see now, is a tool of power—fear in others, that is. I had never grasped its full reach until this moment. Now your nature suddenly becomes clear to me—your actions and words seem quite reasonable. I fear, alas, that you have been the wiser of the two of us. I must confess, with regret, that I always thought you the fool. You had to be my enemy because my laughter threatened to rob you of your power over men. It would have been far better had I come to my senses sooner—become your pupil—and done as you did. Then I would be a king and a priest today, not a poor slave."

"You are free to laugh, if you still can," the priest replied coldly. "I have forgotten how to laugh since I saw what became of Tulma. But Tulma is not your homeland—so laugh, as a poor, homeless slave laughs, gloating over his masters' misfortune. Yet had you spoken such reasonable words sooner—as I just heard from you—we would never have been enemies, Jochaan. You would have become a king, I know it; perhaps not a noble king like Tutmon, but a prince of slaves and the poor. That too is a destiny. The time of the slaves has come, Jochaan—and it is time for you to seize it. I think it wise that I should make my peace with you."

"I would laugh too, if Tulma were my homeland," replied the scholar. "But you cannot understand this laughter, priest, because it is the laughter of the eternally lonely—the laughter that makes my life bearable. There is much pride in my laughter, Nephat, and much falsehood, for I too would like to be able to lament as other men do, and wish there were someone who could understand my lament. But since there is no such person, I have no choice but to laugh. You are

quite right. I am a slave who laughs when his masters suffer. And you are right as well that the time of the slaves has come."

"The time of the slave Jochaan!" said the priest of the holy dragon cautiously. Jochaan fixed his powerful eyes upon the other.

"You clever one, you smooth-tongued one!" he laughed kindly. "I almost answered harmlessly what you wished to hear—and then you would have caught me in your ruinous net! How many weapons will you forge against me? Have you not enough already, and must still have the one that says Jochaan declared the time of the slave Jochaan has come, and that he wishes to be king of the shattered Abessian Islands?—You loyal servant of the House of Tutmon! What do you wish to hear? That I need your precious services under the rule of the slave Jochaan, and would ask you to lend me your arts to rule the fools, so that I might raise my throne beneath the new heaven and upon the new earth? I think I would find enough of your kind willing to render me that service—if I were not enough for myself."

"That may be," nodded the priest. "Though I do not know whether they would stand by you as faithfully as I. I see how serious you remain, Jochaan—serious and unmoved in the face of overwhelming mirth. Never have I heard a purer laughter from you than that of your grave, silent countenance! Do you not know that the conduct of the priesthood must be guided by what is, and by what is likely to come? I see that the time of the slaves and of the servant Jochaan has come, and I hasten to become the priest of the new slave-king. There is not much love in my view, but—whether you will admit it or not—a grain of wisdom, a grain only, for I am too modest to claim more. But that grain I do have, Jochaan! I think it is time you made use of it, for it is offered to you in good faith. A moment ago, before I approached you, I intended to throw my knife into your back—it would have been very convenient, and nothing new for me. In the slaughter of men I am practiced as no other. You can be certain, Jochaan, I would have struck you. Why did I not? Am I truly so foolish as to forgo the chance to destroy an enemy I could easily strike down, and none would have asked: who slew the king's builder?—I did not slay you, for I believe in you, Jochaan! I now know you are right, that the glassy sea will fall upon us. But I also know that you know the path to salvation."

"It is no great art anymore to see and believe it," said the scholar. "Even the dullest must by now have realized that the time is near when it will happen. And soon it will become just as clear that the last refuge lies up there, in my caves, upon the holy mountain."

"In any case, I am the first to ask you: take me with you into your caves, that I may escape destruction," said the priest.

"The caves are open to all, so long as there is space," replied Jochaan coldly. "If there is not enough space, you may bear the blame—for it was you who advised the king to summon the slaves from the holy mountain, those who helped me build the final refuge."

"That is not true!" said Nephat quickly. "The king ordered that the water conduit to Tulma be completed, and had the workers brought in."

A faint smile appeared upon Jochaan's brow, and vanished.

"If that is so, then the king may remain outside, for the fault is his. But you may come with me."

The high priest sought in vain to read the scholar's impenetrable features. Was he serious, or was this cruel mockery? Did he truly intend to exclude the king from the number of those to be saved? It would not be a miracle. Jochaan had no use for Tutmon when the time of the slave-king had come. That man had ambition and an iron will. The path led to Jochaan when the new earth arose that he had foretold.

"Where is the king?" asked Jochaan indifferently. The high priest pointed backward toward the wooded heights.

"He lies with Queen Aramut and the few soldiers who escaped disaster not far behind us, in the forest by the spring that your slaves were to lead to Tulma. Now that spring, too, has nearly dried up and turned murky, though the little water that still trickles from the rock can still be drunk in need. The forest and the steep mountain walls offer some protection against the ash and stonefall from the Peri. The rest of the people of Tulma have fled into the woods and wander there. There are not many who have gathered at your spring; only a few of my priests managed to save themselves, for the catastrophe came too swiftly, and many perished from the poisonous gas that ran before the fire. Only your slaves, who were engaged in the earthworks of the new aqueduct, have remained complete and unharmed."

"Lead me to them," asked the scholar, and rose to his feet. Staggering over the trembling, quivering ground, the two men walked side by side into the forest. A cooling relief and dense twilight flooded around them—a twilight tinged with reddish light that shimmered from the sky through rare gaps in the canopy. The mighty crowns of the primeval trees caught the rain of ash and bent low under its weight. Down the thick trunks and along the cords of the climbing vines trickled a dirty, viscous broth of foul-smelling sap, and the ground crunched beneath a layer of gray dust.

At ordinary times, the leafy dome, heavy with damp heat, would have been unbearably sultry; now it was a blessing after the fiery breath that the molten stream had sent upward from the depths of the valley.

Upward the priest of the sacred beast led the king's builder, until they reached the narrow ravine where the spring flowed—the one Jochaan, despite its distance from the city, had destined to supply the citizens of Tulma with water.

Now the spring had not come to Tulma—the people had come to the spring, lying hopeless and despairing in the dirty, poisoned grass. Barely had they saved their naked lives; most were scarcely clothed in rags. The number of children who had been saved was comparatively great—they had been dragged along by their mothers, the most precious treasure of poor and rich woman alike. Jochaan immediately recognized that the high priest had acted wisely in deciding to change sides and pay homage to the slave-king—for here there was no longer any distinction between master and servant. Around the dwindling trickle of the almost-extinguished spring pressed slaves, women, and children, the noble and the lowly alike, all struggling for a drop of water. The sick lay beside the healthy on the quaking earth, groaning with fear and pain, vomiting amid the mad dance of the earth turned stormy sea. From the valley side and from the heights crawled new figures toward the saving spring, their gasping lungs poisoned by the fiery breath of the sea-wide lava flow, their garments burned, their hair singed, bleeding from the falling stones of the burning mountain. Madmen howled their dreadful songs or laughed carelessly into the desolate heap of misery, blessed in that they no longer recognized their suffering. Men to whom the gods had once meant little learned, in their old age, the fervent prayers for salvation from direst need. Vows rose into the smoke-blackened, pitiless sky—vows that, if fulfilled, would have turned the earth into a paradise of virtue.

No one paid attention to Jochaan as he entered, beside his fiercest enemy, into the circle of the fate-stricken people of the Abessian Isles. Only rarely did a confused, flickering gaze fall upon the scholar from distraught eyes.

The high priest of the sacred beast looked at the scholar questioningly. He was curious to see what the master of human hearts would do here. Was his art at its end? Was he too now just a pitiful fragment of a desperate, helpless crowd?

"Tell us what we must do, lord," he asked timidly and humbly. Jochaan smiled when he heard those words. Could the enemy suddenly call the slave "lord"? How quickly the abyss-cunning priest had adapted himself!

"Bring these people to their senses," Jochaan replied with gentle mockery. "You have shaped them by your will until now and set them the limits

you deemed necessary. Surely that art has not wholly perished amid nature's fury."

Nephat did not answer. He looked hopelessly at the mass of people, huddled together in senseless fear and mad terror like a herd of wild beasts in captivity.

The king's builder looked with pity upon the unfortunate ones—upon the kings of the earth and the great and rich, the captains and the mighty, and all slaves and freemen who had hidden here in the clefts and rocks of the mountains, crying to the mountains and rocks: Fall upon us and hide us from the face of Him who sits upon the throne of the glassy sea and from His wrath. For the great day of His wrath has come, and who shall stand?

"In these days men shall seek death and shall not find it," said the scholar, deeply moved. "They shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them!"

He turned away and went to seek the queen. The priest, however, remained at his side.

"The queen must be saved," said Nephat softly and earnestly. "She is with child and bears in her womb the future of the House of Tutmon. Take her first into your caves, Jochaan."

"So the old love breaks through again!" laughed the king's builder. "Did you not just now put your hope in the king of the slaves?"

"The queen is of Jochaan's spirit," replied Nephat calmly. "I am the priest of this people and bear upon two shoulders. If one king dies, it is the other to whom I pay homage, when he wins the crown. Am I frank enough with you, or do you wish further explanations? Who guarantees your life to me, Jochaan? Can disaster not strike you as well?"

Jochaan nodded but did not answer. Pressed within the throng of the people, the scholar found the queen and Tutmon, lord of the Abessian Isles, king of kings, godlike ruler. Old Galmon crouched beside his master like a faithful beast, staring blankly ahead, taking no notice of Jochaan.

The king leaned with his broad back against a tree. His feverish eyes flickered about as though he could not grasp the enormity of what was happening before him. A ragged soldier staggered past and tripped over the legs of his royal master, then rose and stumbled on cursing, without a thought that he had just kicked his dreaded lord—the master of life and death. Even Galmon did not stir to punish this insolence with the mammoth whip.

Aramut lay with closed eyes in the grass, unmoving. She seemed to have fainted from sickness and pain.

The builder Jochaan knelt before his royal lord and bowed his proud, mighty head before the unhappy prince. Tutmon, rigid with astonishment, looked in disbelief at this gesture from the scholar of the holy mountain. Was there truly still a man who acknowledged the king? Over the smooth features of the high priest passed a mocking smile. Why did this man play such a pitiful game? Had he not already broken, in his heart, the loyalty he now displayed—if a slave's loyalty was ever real at all?

"Jochaan!" cried the king.

"My good lord," answered the builder calmly.

Liar, liar! thought the high priest of the sacred beast. Now I know that you are made of the same wood as I and the others—that your virtue is nothing but a vain show, worn when your time had not yet come. Twice useful, and twice dangerous as well—less dangerous than useful to me and mine, but perilous to the fools. A king! A king! Worthy to wear the crown of the whole world!

The queen rose when she heard the scholar's name. Galmon too lifted his dim eyes and looked at the builder in momentary confusion. The soldiers nearby took notice and pressed closer. Some of the slaves who had been with him on the holy mountain also came nearer to see and hear what had driven the solitary one from the mountain into the circle of misery.

"What do you want?" asked the king suspiciously.

"Give me back my slaves, lord!" begged Jochaan. "You no longer need them for the construction of the aqueduct, since your city lies in ruins. But I am nothing without the strength of their arms, for you know that I am crippled and fit for little physical labor. You are a king of many, and you must care for them. You are the father of your people, whom you must save, if you are a true king. I wish to help you in this. Therefore give me back the slaves you took from me, lord, for they shall save the people."

Tutmon straightened himself and looked searchingly at his high priest. His face was twisted and harsh.

"What say you to this man's request, Nephat?" he asked with quiet scorn.

"Give him the slaves, lord," replied the idol priest firmly, but he avoided his ruler's gaze.

A wild twitch ran over the king's pale, furrowed face. His one good eye flashed in anger.

"And what of us? And of me? What will become of my queen and the nobles and freemen who have escaped here?" he demanded.

"We will stay here, lord, until Jochaan calls us," the queen put in softly.

"I did not ask you!" the king snapped at his wife. "I want to know from Jochaan what will become of us. The builder has always known counsel in the past. Let him now advise what is good. Or is your art at an end, Jochaan? Could you only warn and can you not help now, when the need is great?"

The scholar looked at the angry, sick man so that he lowered his eyes. "Think of Araton, lord!" said Jochaan.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked the king gruffly. "Spare us and yourself the riddles and speak so that I can understand. I have enough riddles and want sensible counsel from you."

"Araton went to fulfill his duty to the people without asking what would become of him. Perhaps he knew full well that he would not return, for I told him it would be so—and yet he went! — You should do the same as he and not ask what will become of you, king, for it is not important."

"So that I shall not return, like Araton!" laughed Tutmon. Jochaan gazed carelessly at his lord's torn face.

"What does it matter if you only do your duty," he answered harshly. "Why do you lie here and not act, king? In such days there is no excuse. A king has no time to be ill. Did you not see Araton's soldiers who went to war though they were sick? Those soldiers were kings, lord! Therefore rise and gather what remains of your people. Provide food and water. You are the lord and need do nothing yourself; you have hands that work for you, and even heads that think for you, if you will it."

"Who still obeys the king?" asked Tutmon, casting a bitter glance at the remnants of his people.

"Act, if you are a leader; for a leader everyone gladly and willingly obeys. On your islands the homeless wander without food and water. Gather them and send out seekers for food and water, otherwise you will soon be a king without a people. Round up mules and dogs, dig traps and search the fields for unspoiled fruit. Erect huts and see that fires burn again on your people's hearths. Count those who are healthy and strong, so that you will be ready to come to me

on the holy mountain when the time is fulfilled. — I tell you, the time is near, lord! Act before it is too late. Meanwhile I will do my part in the last hour; to enlarge the caves to make room for many. It will not be my fault if ruin finds us in unfinished grottoes."

"And the queen?" Tutmon asked uncertainly.

"I will stay with you, lord," Aramut said quickly, casting a fearful glance at the scholar's tall, upstanding figure. Jochaan made a short, swift movement with his crippled right hand, a motion impatient and imperious, not that of a submissive slave.

"The queen cannot remain with you!" he said in a raised voice. "Galmon will bring her up to me on the holy mountain, for she needs care and can be of no use to you in your work."

"I remain with my lord, in the place where I belong, because I am the queen," Aramut said firmly and looked past Jochaan into the void.

The king's builder raised his hand in supplication.

"Your Highness!" he said in a pleading, gentle voice. "Have you ever listened to your servant Jochaan and will you not do so today? Have you ever trusted me blindly and will you distrust me now? Do you not know that I love you, and that I would never have asked you to leave your lord and follow me unless it were necessary? Will you not help me save the future? How often have I praised your wisdom and insight when we learned together! Use what you have learned and think, queen. To whom do you owe your life — to the present or to the future? I should think the answer is not hard! Therefore you will come with me."

"I cannot," the woman answered. She searched in her mind for the little royal sister on Jochaan's holy mountain and saw her happy, joyful smile; therefore she repeated, "I cannot, Jochaan. Do not ask why I cannot, for I will give you no answer."

"Then I ask you, king, to force your consort for her own good," came the scholar's words, metallic and hard from his thin mouth. "You are not here to yield to the foolish wishes of a woman who resists what is necessary. Order Galmon to bring the queen up into the caves. Galmon knows the way. I can tell you no more. It is for you now to act. — And give me back my slaves."

"Take them, if they obey you," replied Tutmon faintly. "Have I not always said that you were the king and not I! Now prove your power, you man of hearts, you thief of love."

"They already obey me!" laughed Jochaan. "For they know better than you that up there, in my icy desert, it is more livable than in this valley filled with fire. If you therefore will not or cannot command, then I will ask them whether they wish to come with me—to hard labor and to salvation."

But Jochaan did not have to ask.

The degraded people, to whom the lonely caves of the holy mountain—with their warm hearths of black burning stones—seemed, under these circumstances, like huts of bliss, pressed even closer and shouted all at once that they wished to climb with Jochaan immediately.

"Take the queen with you!" commanded Jochaan.

"I will stay with the king," said Aramut unmoved. Jochaan tried to read in her eyes what drove her to such obstinacy, but the woman lowered her gaze. A flash of understanding stirred in the scholar—he sensed why she refused to come—but he had to remain hard. Feelings that moved the heart of a poor woman could not be heeded in this last extremity. If he was to save anyone, he had to be ruthless.

Jochaan looked around him. His slaves crowded close, full of expectation and hope; they trusted the superior spirit who sought to lead them to salvation.

"I will not go without the queen," declared the scholar with merciless hardness. "King, order your consort to obey, or I will order it. Time has become terribly short, lord, and my commands will be brief accordingly."

Tutmon's eye blazed. Would this slave dare speak in such a tone of command to his royal master?

Even Galmon had risen, his dull old eyes fixed in astonishment on the king's builder, whom he hardly recognized in this imperious bearing and speech. He stepped slowly, unsteadily toward the scholar.

"Be off with you, Jochaan," he said kindly, but with an unmistakable threat in his deep voice. "You seem to have lost your senses, that you dare speak to the lord in this tone. May I remind you that you are nothing but a slave, and only by the king's mercy kept your life?"

Jochaan laid a hand on the old general's broad shoulder and smiled at him good-naturedly.

"Old man," he said calmly, "I have no time to lose with you. If you mean well by the queen, then beg the lord to let her come with me—for I can no longer plead, I must now command."

"You have heard, the lady will stay with the king," the soldier replied darkly. Jochaan pushed him aside.

"Seize the queen, men!" he ordered curtly.

The uprising broke out. Powerless stood the few men of the king's guard amid the mass of Jochaan's rebellious slaves. The wretched citizens of Tulma stared in astonishment at the tremendous outrage—that a slave among slaves dared to defy the king's command and seize the queen. But not a hand was raised to aid the unfortunate ruler.

"Galmon!" cried Tutmon hoarsely, rising heavily to shield the queen from the pressing slaves.

Then the old general drew the stone axe from his leather belt and hurled it at Jochaan. The high priest Nephat's grasp at Galmon's arm came too late, though it somewhat slowed the throw that struck Jochaan on the forehead.

The scholar saw the axe flying toward him, but had no time to dodge.

"Folly triumphs—honest folly!" he thought with a laugh before the thundering blow struck his head. Then darkness fell before his eyes; the people around him vanished into night; a distant bright rushing sounded in his ears—and then all was still.

Jochaan lay in the trampled filth by the spring, his blood trickling from his eyes and brow into the hands of the queen, who held his head.

A menacing murmur ran through the crowd of slaves and died away. The armed soldiers gathered around the old leader, ready to strike against the servants.

The swift, decisive act of the old warrior had made an impression. The sacred person of the king was not yet defenselessly surrendered to the mutiny of his thralls.

Galmon pressed both hands to his temples as he stepped to the lifeless body of the builder. Tears streamed from his eyes for a deed he would never have done had his king not cried so desperately for his loyalty. He motioned to the soldiers to lower their weapons and knelt beside Jochaan. A dull, bestial wail escaped his chest. The queen had laid the scholar's bloody head in her lap and kissed Jochaan's shattered, darkened eyes.

"I did not do it!" bellowed Galmon, his voice breaking. "Jochaan, you are not dead—speak to me, Jochaan, speak to your old Galmon who loves you like his own son!" Howling, the old soldier sank to his knees and tenderly caressed the limp, crippled hand of the builder of the new earth.

Nephat listened into the distance, tense and holding his breath. Through the thunder of the fire-spewing mountains there came a tremendous, rushing roar — like a mighty, bright surge of sound. The explosions in the earth doubled in force, and the ground heaved upward as though it were arching its back to burst apart.

The color drained from the dark face of the high priest; his lips grew pale, for the roaring meant more than the sound of a tropical downpour — it meant the flood, the flood that came from the great waters!

"The sea!" he cried out.

With pounding hearts, the men at the spring listened to the dreadful sound. They knew the crashing of tidal waves that often broke upon the coasts and claimed victims among man and beast, but this sound could only come from a wave so vast that it had already overtopped the mountain rims of the island and now rolled on over glowing rivers of lava. They knew that only flight into the mountains could bring salvation — and they did not hesitate.

In the blink of an eye, the place by the spring was deserted.

Quick as wild beasts, the people climbed the holy mountain, vanishing among cliffs and trees, into ravines and dry streambeds that climbed upward into racing gray clouds. There was no time to lose, for the wave knew no mercy and was swifter — far swifter — than the sluggish flows of lava.

The soldiers seized the ailing king and dragged him with them; loyal comrades grasped their fallen general and pushed him forward. Only the queen refused to go. She remained behind with Nephat beside Jochaan, whose gray-bearded chin was lifted toward the sky.

The knees of the high priest trembled with fear. Yet in strange loyalty he stayed with the queen. Aramut looked at him with astonished, unbelieving eyes. Was this implacable enemy of the poor scholar now playing the magnanimous man — now, when it was too late, when Galmon's axe had struck him down?

"He is not dead, queen!" cried Nephat as he saw the lady hesitate. "Take hold, woman! Up into the mountains with him. I cannot carry him alone — he is too heavy."

Breathless and frantic, priest and lady dragged the body of the king's builder upward, toward the saving heights. With aching lungs and faltering knees, half faint from exhaustion, the queen carried the beloved man she had refused to follow to the holy mountain — for she knew Zista was there, the king's sister, Jochaan's beloved. A dull pounding filled her ears, her heart faltered; Aramut collapsed and lay still. Nephat cast a brief, weighing glance at man and woman.

Jochaan is finished, he thought darkly. A pity for the kingly man. His eyes are smashed, and red blood trickles from his ears. Galmon has a heavy hand! But the lady carries in her womb the future of the House of Tutmon. The choice is not hard.

He lifted the unconscious woman in his arms and fled — up toward the holy mountain — with the dreadful roaring at his back, whipping his nerves and driving his legs to run like those of a youth.

Overwhelming every other sound, the sea came thundering on — a sea flinging the sea over the land. With a steep, towering wall it burst through the valley of Tulma, bearing whole uprooted forests on its wet back — above the sea of glowing lava surged the sea of the tropical ocean.

Scalding steam boiled upward from the depths to the mountain heights, seized by the storm and hurled eastward. Explosions burst from the waves and were smothered under new masses of water; through fissures in the earth the cold torrents plunged into the deep and struck the molten rock below, so that giant fountains of snow-white vapor shot straight into the murky air, their tips bent by the roaring stormwind and quickly scattered like a phantom illusion.

All around the valley of Tulma the remnants of mankind climbed for their lives. But only a few reached the higher ground that the flood could not overtake. Crashing, the sea rolled through the mountain forests, choking out the desperate cries that no one heard.

Undermined and split apart, the trees of the forest leaned and whirled as tangled wreckage in the flood, swept eastward into the seething, boiling sea — where the glassy ocean plunged in wild rush beneath the clouds of steam, smoke, and blood-red haze.

THE WHITE STONE

Araton looked from the saddle of his horse over the arm of the sea vanishing into mist — the same inlet that had safely carried his riders and infantry across, on the ships of the royal fleet, to Northland, before the tail of the tidal wave had rolled through the quiet waters and swept those ships eastward before his eyes — before he even fully understood what had happened! A few shattered dugout canoes were lodged high among the cliffs, and Araton asked himself in bewilderment how they could have come there. The wave had come with such speed and vanished just as quickly that the whole dreadful event seemed to the prince like a heavy, evil dream.

"Now I can never go back," he thought. "Jochaan's prophecy has closed the first bolt upon my homeland. When will the other bolt fall — the one that seals the gate of return forever? The baggage train, with all my wealth and with the woman I loved, is lost; the train burned, the woman in Jochaan's arms. I never knew how poor a prince could be!"

Coldly the west wind tore through the troop of riders, who had dismounted behind him and stood in the low, stunted forest, shivering as they held their shivering horses by the bridles. Araton pulled the tiger pelt tighter across his chest and shuddered. The air was thin and biting — even colder than back home on the holy mountain. Here snow already fell upon the lower peaks, and the volcanoes that rose in Northland too, their glowing, smoking heads lost in racing clouds, bore white crowns around their flaming cores. Strange black roads of hardened lava cut through the pure, gleaming slopes; dull meltwater trickled from the icy heights into the valleys, collecting in hollows and ravines to form foul, stinking swamps.

In a low basin there heaved and roared a great inland lake, churned by earth tremors and the cold west wind — a lake the tidal wave had left behind, trapped between hills with no outlet. Dead animals and men drifted with the surf toward the restless shore.

Araton's company had been spared.

After crossing the sea arm, the prince had led them to the eastern slope of a hill to regroup. Now the waters had receded as though nothing had happened. To the right and left, the raging sea had rolled past without the soldiers ever seeing it. Only the tremendous roaring had told them that a merciless fate had passed very near — so near that only the mountain's shadow against the flood had saved them, where they had camped upon its eastern flank.

How long before fate would seize them as well?

At the edge of the newly formed flood lake, men and women stood, curiously dragging ashore what the waves cast up — here a silent woman, a child, or a household beast; there the rough-hewn timbers of a poor peasant's hut that had once stood somewhere in the valley. Whole forests of timber, torn up with their roots by the wave, were piled in tangled heaps on the eastern slopes of the bay, buried deep in the sludge of the silted deep-sea clay.

Out of the mist came the sound of rowing — an ordered squadron, with trumpet calls and heavy snorting. Mighty, angular heads loomed ghostlike from the streaming vapor: woolly-covered skulls with glittering, spiral-curved tusks, trunks raised high above the yellow flood.

Mammoths and woolly rhinoceroses steered toward the saving shore like a brave, storm-tested fleet — stalwart comrades of the ancient Earth, unwilling to yield the struggle, resolved to defy fate as long as muscle and breath endured.

At the head of the herd swam an old mammoth bull, his ears flapping, his yellow, twisted tusks gleaming. Like a blaring war trumpet his warning cry rang through the misty air and the howling storm. On the shore stood men — the dread hereditary enemies of every free creature that walked the earth.

The herd hesitated — and turned away.

Toward another point along the shore the lead beast turned its course; obediently, with blind trust in the old one's seasoned judgment, the ancient swimmers followed. Mist and clouds closed suddenly over the strange fleet.

The sound of their rushing and snorting grew fainter—and died away.

Slowly the surf brought in what had weakened and given up the struggle—what was too young or too old: two small woolly rhinoceroses and a very ancient mammoth cow. The giant creature's trunk was sunk in the muddy flood; only its small, angry eyes remained wide open, as though, still full of life's defiance, they would continue the fight alone. The struggle of these strong ones was ended, for it had surpassed their strength. Bravely battling, they had fallen before the incomprehensible power that was remaking the world—before the vast mowing scythe of the glassy sea, which sliced sharply through the ripened harvest.

It was no child's play to wrestle for one's life in such a time—an age that had gone out of joint.

Wordlessly, trembling with joy, the soldiers fell upon the unexpected bounty that gave them meat for many days. The death of the beasts prolonged human life for a short span. The prize was welcome—doubly welcome—since

most of the baggage train had been swept away with the ships before it could be unloaded.

Araton watched with a bitter smile as his poor men hacked apart the stranded animals in frantic haste, and how loud arguments and haggling over the division broke out, until the captains had to restore order with their whips.

"We live from hour to hour, no longer," thought Araton. "When will this torment end?"

Loneliness! How often had Jochaan spoken of the loneliness of thought—more terrible than any outward event. Here Araton felt that, since his departure from Tulma, two men had become utterly alone: Jochaan in the south, and he in the north. But Jochaan had resolved not to bear it; he had reached for the king's sister, so that loneliness would not crush him.

"Old friend," thought the prince, "I too will not bear this solitude alone. There are fair-haired women here in the north—women I have always admired, for they are of my own blood. Somewhere I shall take one, for I will not let loneliness crush me. If you will be the king of the new earth in the south, then I will be so beneath the new heaven of the north. Each of us carries the iron staff—who will shepherd men with it, you or I? Your sons or mine? I will swim through the waves of fate as you do, builder of the king—royal builder—as those brave beasts who vanished into the mist, resolved to live. Out of my solitude I will bring forth a new race!"

The young prince's features brightened at this thought; his figure straightened in the saddle. Iron sword and iron will go well together, Jochaan!

"The captains!" he called down into the black turmoil of his soldiery—beastlike men, gathered from all races and tribes of the earth, who had met in the final refuge of the Abessian Isles—the islands still called Abyssinia today, "the gathering of the peoples." Only faint tide marks high on the mountains now show that once the sea had washed thousands of meters above the peaks—marks gnawed into the hard rock by the storm-driven flood of the moon-towered ocean.

Obediently the warriors climbed one after another up to their leader and received their marching orders.

The columns closed ranks. Commands and curses echoed through mist and storm. The black serpent of fur-clad figures began to move. Northward marched, over shaking, trembling ground, the small, shrunken army of the Abessian realm—to guard borders that soon would be borders no more, for the collapse of the glassy sea and the draining of the deluge would blur all boundaries. The islands that now barely rose above the tropical ocean, with a

few mountain peaks, would soon tower thousands of meters above the sea—as part of the vast continental mass of Africa, a riddle to the men of later ages.

Araton rode ahead with the cavalry, on staggering, spent horses. A torturing restlessness drove him northward—to the white stone of the mainland—as though the time foretold by Jochaan had come.

From day to day, the appearance of the dreadful giant radiance of the glassy sea changed. It seemed to the prince that the fiery glow waxed and waned fivefold each day in quick succession—that it receded and then shot nearer again to the earth.

When the glow dimmed, the heavens were still for half an hour; when it blazed closer, the hurricane stormed through the crippled treetops with redoubled fury, lightning storms raged wildly over the riders' heads, and the tortured crust of the earth heaved more violently in desperate, convulsive throes.

The soldiers too felt, more and more each day, that the end was near—that some terrible event was imminent, lurking behind the dark storm clouds like a monstrous beast of prey. In grim silence the riders, covered in frost, sat in their leather saddles, heads bowed when the light of the crystalline sea drew near. Their bearded, furrowed faces were twisted with sorrow as they stared into the campfire flames, while the terrible giant moon shot with uncanny swiftness through the earth's shadow. Barely an hour it took for that dreadful light to reappear blazing in the southern sky. Barely an hour more it sped with waning glow toward the eastern horizon; and in less than four hours it rose again in the west, steep and burning, so that the ground bent and heaved beneath the hooves of the gasping, panic-snorting horses. Here and there the frozen ground split open with a crash. Muffled cries echoed accusingly through the gray, roaring dusk. Men and horses fell and vanished into the depths, which yawned below them smoking like the maw of hell.

Araton jerked his horse around—just as the captain riding beside him vanished into a crevasse.

"Another one!" thought the prince. "The earth devours the children it has borne!"

At every new resting place, a few more riders were missing.

Araton no longer tried to count them, nor to see how many were gone. He pressed northward, as though there lay salvation from danger and ruin — there, where his friend had carved the fortresses into the white stone.

"Forward, men! We have no time to lose."

Their breath smoked from feverish lungs into the icy, cutting storm air. Ancient continental ice cracked under the hooves of the beasts, lying hundreds of meters deep upon the primeval bedrock, hard as crystal. On the mountainsides, rare moss still greened; crooked pines and gnarled oaks clung with desperate will to live, here and there wedged into sheltered eastern clefts of rock. Mammoth herds trotted across glittering plains from pasture to pasture, sometimes visible through torn veils of mist and blowing snow to the men riding northward.

The men froze miserably inside their thick pelts. The thin, cutting air pierced their bones.

Again and again came the halt by the blazing campfires. Araton went from group to group, forbidding waste of the precious wood. No one answered him. The men obeyed in silence. The flames flickered lower.

Rest and march alternated in short rhythm, for the faithful long-haired horses were starving and emaciated.

Onward they went again.

The prince rode past the dying fires where the wind howled through the embers. Lonely shapes still crouched there, unable to part from the life-giving warmth. Frozen, collapsed upon themselves, they slept a long, long sleep—painless, with no dreadful waking to follow.

"Take the men's pelts with you," ordered Araton. "We'll need them yet, it seems." His voice sounded thin and unreal.

Their breath came in gasps; hearts raced beneath the scant air pressure of the northern latitudes. Yet it had never been so oppressive as in this winter. The glassy sea drew to itself the gases necessary for life, as vital as daily bread; its eerie disk of light now circled farther south, whirling madly around the scourged earth, tearing the air upward with irresistible force, drawing it into itself like a narrow, steeply rising funnel—sucking up the sea, and the hard earth with its molten core—heaping at the equator a belt of air, ocean, and land piled atop one another like a colossal sluice-gate waiting to be released in a catastrophe so dreadful that the memory of it would not fade even to this day.

Araton rode on with his men.

They knew that the fortresses on the white stone—on the kilometers-thick inland ice sheets—were waiting to save them, deep dug into crystal walls and warmly covered with ice and snow. There pelts warmed by hearth fires awaited them, and men stood guard on the outposts against the northern tribes,

and warm food waited in their ice caverns from the stores the king's builder had gathered over many years of toil.

Up ahead, the columns of riders halted. Half-asleep, the men in the rear tugged at their horses' reins and slowly raised their lowered heads.

Cursing, Araton spurred his horse forward.

"Onward, onward! Why do you hesitate? Are you mad, and wish to freeze to death just before the goal?!"
He lashed at the men with his whip.

The soldiers stood silently beside their horses, dismounted.

By the road lay the enemy — here in dense heaps, there scattered like snowflakes upon gray ice — frozen stiff, senseless, dead of cold and hunger, destroyed by the merciless frost of the northern land.

They no longer needed to seek a warmer country; no blow of an axe was needed to conquer what Araton's dwindled, half-frozen host could scarcely have defended.

The harvest was ripe here, too! The sharp scythe of the glassy sea had cut into full grain — and its harvest was rich.

In dull silence the men wandered from heap to heap. Frozen and dead, the poor fair-haired human beasts of the North lay before their foe, their fur-wrapped limbs stiff as glass, their clear, unbroken eyes staring into the cruel sky — without accusation, without rage, some smiling faintly, others with quiet, thoughtful faces.

Shuddering, Araton turned away. One soldier had taken a frozen woman by the arm to see whether the child beneath her still lived. Now he stood staring, half insane with terror, at the severed arm of the woman that he held in his hand — a slender, white, delicate arm, the fingers stiffly curled as they protruded from the white bearskin. In heaps the dead lay piled upon one another, their bearded faces peaceful, as though they beheld in the distance a better land, a green sunlit shore they had scarcely dreamed of in life.

"Forward!" ground out the prince between chattering teeth.

Horror at the pitiless fate of the earth had seized him with bony hands and clutched his throat. The riders clambered into their saddles with stiff, jerky movements. But some remained behind, squatting silent and motionless beside the enemy who now slept so happily, as though he had never fought for his life.

Araton struck the men without pity with the flat of Jochaan's iron blade; he seized them by the arms and shook them to wake them; he begged, pleaded, and again beat upon the motionless soldiers in dull fury. Only rarely did a sigh answer him, rarely did a drooping head stir faintly.

Too late!

Whoever had sat down remained — and fell asleep without pain.

Who, so gently, had touched their shoulders? Was it the woman at home, in the warm hut? Was it the little four-year-old boy who, each morning, crept into the bear pelts to his father and pressed his small round head against that broad shoulder?

Despairing, the prince ceased his efforts.

"If I, too, were to stay now, all torment would end," he thought, shaken, and with a hard, envious laugh he looked upon the peaceful faces of the dead. "Why do I make such foolish effort to save what must perish?"

Two of his riders had remained with him. They stamped their feet on the hard ice to keep warm.

"It's no use, lord," said one. "The dead will ride no more with us. Let them lie, prince — we cannot help them."

"Do you not hear the dead calling?" asked Araton, bending over the heap of corpses of his enemies. It seemed to him as though a faint sound issued from beneath — like the dying echo of a human voice, a fine, soft weeping.

"Nothing, nothing, lord! The dead call no more. Come, dear prince — on the white stone, in the fortresses, there is safety from all peril. It is warm there. Why stay here? Come with us before we freeze!"

"The dead are calling!" repeated Araton, his voice breaking. The prince let the reins fall from his hands and burrowed into the mound of corpses so that it sounded like the cracking of glass.

The soldiers exchanged meaningful looks and nodded sadly. Their lord had surely gone mad from grief. That had happened often, of late.

"Take hold!" bellowed Araton — and the sound of his voice died away in the raging west wind as though within a hollow glass bell.

Obediently, the riders dismounted and, with stiff, numbed hands, began to help.

Beneath the mound of frozen enemies, Araton pulled out a fur-wrapped bundle of life—something that moved and uttered faint, unintelligible words.

"A woman!" said one of the soldiers.

"And she's alive!" said the other.

Wrapped in several thick layers of bearskin lay the last survivor of the northern people before the riders of the Abessian realm. A fine, ringing voice, like that of a child, revealed to the prince that indeed a spark of life still lingered beneath the mound of the frozen dead—kept from death by frost through the bodies of her friends and kin.

"Zista, little Zista!" cried Araton in joy as he held the living prize in his arms.

Again the men exchanged glances.

Now it was certain—the poor prince had gone mad. The little king's sister had perished in the flames on the Pass of the Peri; he had told them so himself. And now he held this foreign child, this child of the enemy, believing her to be his own wife! Pitying and suspicious, dark eyes glanced sideways toward their lord.

But Araton laughed at his men, radiant as a happy boy who has found something wonderful.

"Don't look at me so foolishly!" he said kindly. "Forward! Mount up! We must hurry, so we may rejoin my riders soon!"

He lifted the fur bundle before him onto his horse, whose frozen bones creaked into motion, breaking slowly into a trot.

How the bundle squirmed! As though it truly were little Zista, who had once refused to ride northward with him for all the treasures in the world. The small creature within clearly did not wish to go now either; she must have feared that she would be slain, or that something terrible awaited her. Blue, terrified eyes looked up at the strange man above a red, frozen nose; muffled, pleading words came from beneath the furs that hid the mouth of the foundling.

"Zista, little Zista!" laughed the prince into those blue eyes. "Struggle if you must—it will warm you, and you need the warmth! What beautiful blue eyes you have, little stranger-woman. And such very, very pretty nostrils too!"

Curious, he pushed aside the fur from her mouth for a moment and heard an angry hiss escape through splendid teeth.

"Oh dear!" he laughed mischievously. "Are you such a serpent? I had meant to give you a kiss, my lovely prize—but perhaps it's too soon; I might draw my mouth back marked with blood! Don't fight me so foolishly—you're mad to pull away from me. If we keep close, we'll be warm, and a living man warms better than a heap of frozen corpses."

Again words poured from beneath the fur, quick and fluent—this time less defiant, and even a little tearful.

"Well now," murmured Araton with a quiet laugh as he felt the resistance cease. The little prize of death suddenly yielded and nestled against her knight in surrender. She seemed to find no trace of hunger or cruelty in the young prince's face. The blue eyes closed, and the head sank with a deep sigh against Araton's chest.

Soon after, the rescued enemy was asleep.

"Zista snores," said the prince to the rider trotting beside him. "Can you hear how she snores?"

The soldier shook his fur-covered head. He was too far from the girl to hear her breathing. Instead, he looked sidelong at his lord in wonder. Such high-born princes found comfort swiftly—and in strange ways! Had not his young, beautiful wife perished in fire but recently? A sigh escaped the soldier's chest. It was none of his affair anyway—what did it matter? If only the fortress on the white stone would soon take in his frozen, trembling body! The cold gnawed intolerably at his strength; his fur-wrapped legs hung limp on either side of the horse, lifeless.

The horses grew livelier as they went; their stiff bones warmed with movement until at last they managed a steady trot and caught up with the comrades ahead.

Araton felt, with quiet delight, the warmth of the foreign child against his chest and listened to her gentle breathing—where now and then, indeed, a little snore mixed in.

Curiously, he studied her delicately arched eyebrows, for her eyes and nose had now disappeared again beneath the warming furs. In boyish happiness, the prince pressed his lips to where he thought her cheek must be, breathing warm air through the fur. A joyful laugh welled up in his heart when he thought he heard a contented sigh in reply. Somewhere, two small hands groped under the furs for a more comfortable place and then were still again.

Never had he taken part in a campaign so bloodless or with such a gentle prize, though he had ridden many winters with the king and Galmon into Northland to guard the borders of the realm—into that Northland whose living boundaries then lay where the Mediterranean Sea lies today. Beyond those borders all land had been buried beneath the rigid armor of the Ice Age: kilometers-thick ice covering mountains and plains, the eternal white stone frozen glass-hard in the thin, cutting air under the pressing cold of outer space. The earth's protecting mantle of air had been drawn away toward the equator by the glassy sea, leaving the polar lands with only a thin, powerless veil of warmth.

Once more the prince rode at the head of his diminished band of riders.

How comfortable and easy the riding was here! The quakes that had rolled their ghastly undulations across the solid lands were here muffled, showing themselves only as a faint, occasional heaving beneath the hooves. From near and far, however, came the sharp tearing crack of splitting ice. Their path ran over a frozen sea-arm—an endless, level plain whose blinding whiteness vanished suddenly into drifting, icy mist. Yet the danger of plunging into any open fissure was small, for the upwelling water froze almost instantly into black, translucent ice—solid and load-bearing even when thin, locked fast by a frost fiercer than anything known even in today's Arctic. Shapes with plumes of smoky breath before their fur-wrapped faces loomed suddenly out of the fluttering haze. Mechanically, the warriors reached for their axes with cramped, frozen hands and sluggish motions. White vapor streamed from the nostrils of the exhausted horses.

"They are friends!" cried the prince back over his shoulder, riding ahead, Jochaan's black sword ready in his hand.

A dull cheer rippled through the fur-swathed masses on their shaggy mounts. Salvation at last, in their direst need! The strange men proved to be garrisons from Jochaan's ice fortresses on the White Stone—the frontier watch of the realm against the pale northern foe.

"Welcome, lord!" came the hollow voices from beneath rimed helmets. "You'll find little work this winter. The Northmen came earlier than usual, but they were few—and those few are now frozen, save perhaps a handful who are likewise doomed. Only one fortress they took, because the captain stationed there grew careless and slept by the fire with his men. But the intruders, too, we struck down a few days later—for they did the same, and slept."

Araton dismounted and gently lifted down his living prize.

"Bring the horses and men at once into the caves," he ordered kindly. The garrison commander's report seemed not to interest him, for he had already

seen along the way the frost's murderous power. "It's a miracle we survived at all," he added, catching his breath.

"Yes, prince," replied the captain. "I scarce believed you would ever come. The winter in this sun-season is cruel beyond memory. We know well that this year every scouting ride may mean death by ice. —How fare things in Tulma, lord? And how is Tutmon, the king? A messenger told me he was ill and could not come himself in this cold season."

"Later," answered Araton wearily. "There is sorrow enough in what I must tell you. For now we must reach your warm fires—or we shall freeze before your fortress gate."

Like phantoms the riders vanished one by one beneath the ice. They knew their tunnels and chambers from winters past, and knew how gloriously warm they became when men and beasts crowded together inside. Araton looked around and smiled in quiet satisfaction. The snowfield was empty; the riders were safe. Now he could think of himself—though not for long—for anxious concern filled him for his infantry, which was marching north by the same route the cavalry had taken. He must return to them once his frozen limbs were thawed and his gnawing hunger eased. He also had to care for his ward, his living spoil. The girl in his arms stirred, trying to turn to the other side within his furs; when she could not, she began to move with lively impatience, so that Araton could clearly feel the indignant little pushes his new "Zista" delivered to enforce her will.

"That won't do, little bride!" laughed the prince. "The wrappings are too tight—and I am not to blame, whatever you may think!"

"Have you brought your lady wife with you, lord?" asked the fortress captain. "She is heartily welcome—no less than yourself! It must have been a bitter journey for so delicate a woman, and it's a marvel she survived. But now the warm chambers stand ready for you both—those meant for the king and his court. Not as splendid as in rich Tulma, to be sure, but comfortable and homely; one would never guess that beneath the boards of walls and floor lies the clanging white stone itself."

Wrapped sentries appeared in the drifting mist and vanished again, swallowed by the darkness like gray phantoms. The captain sent the guards to their posts, as was his duty—indifferent as to whether the enemy would come or not. Some desperate, scattered riders of the northern nomads might still be abroad, and even they had to be denied passage south!

Araton descended with his prize down steps of dirty ice into the depths. In an instant, the roaring of the cold northern storm ceased; deep, calm stillness murmured in his ears between the dimly gleaming walls of ice—startling,

blissful! A wave of joy swept over the prince, a feeling of almost dizzying relief at being safe again, so intense that it nearly bent him double. The nerves that had been lashed raw relaxed at once. Reeling—not only from the earthquakes—Araton entered the royal chambers where, from now on, he would himself be king.

"When I've eaten and drunk," he ordered the captain from the threshold, "I want a fresh, rested horse from your stable—also a few of your garrison men with good mounts, torches, pack animals, and some wood from the stores. I know you hate to spare the precious wood, but I can't use Jochaan's black burning stones in an open-field storm. I must ride back to the men who had to make the journey to Northland on foot and try to find them. Perhaps I can still drive them onward to the saving fortresses, though there is little hope."

The captain bowed deeply and withdrew.

Araton crossed the low room where he had so often stood before the king to make his reports, carrying the strange living prize into the sleeping chamber. Beside a small fire of glowing coals lay smooth, round fieldstones—set there to warm the beds. A flue above the hearth led the smoke through the meter-thick ceiling of hard ice into the open air.

"Now I shall unwrap you, little woman," said the prince seriously, matter-of-factly. "Keep still, for I'm going to put you in a warmed bed—you'll have it all to yourself; mine's over there. Let's see now what I've picked up on this icy winter's night! Judging by those rosy little nostrils, I've done well. So!—three furs you've got on, my fair one. And under that, a whole tunic of soft marten skin—and forgive my curiosity—linen trousers too! Where could your father have found such cloth? He looked after you well, I must say—you must have been his sunshine, just like the true Zista in the king's court of Tulma! Stop wriggling, or you'll never get into bed, you silly child. Yes, you'll have warm food too—just be patient!"

Thus the prince spoke to the northern woman, who understood not a word but clearly felt that the tall stranger meant her no harm.

Soon she, too, began to chatter, unbothered whether this strange foreign soldier and enemy understood her or not. Araton replied in the same carefree tone, pulling the triple fur cap from her blonde hair and gazing, honestly delighted, upon the fresh, lovely face of the enemy's daughter. She did not look like his Zista, but she was not at all uncomely.

Luckily, there was no Jochaan here to take her from him!

For a moment, a shadow crossed the prince's face. Then he laughed again, unconcerned.

"Zista—that will be your name from this day on," he said, and lifted the girl into the bed of thick, pre-warmed furs. "I hope you understood me; if not, I'll teach you in time. Shall I already ask you formally whether you consent to become the wife of Prince Araton? You'll have to decide that yourself this time, for your poor father is dead—and besides, he'd likely have answered such a question with an axe! But I see that's premature; I must first court you and turn your head as best I can. I practiced that in Tulma—sometimes with, sometimes without success, if you'd care to know. There—take these warm stones, little woman; put them on your belly, if you'll pardon the expression—it wouldn't be courtly talk in Tulma—or on your feet, wherever you like. Yes, I'll wipe your nose too; it's thawing now after the murderous cold like an icicle near a warm stove."

Though the nomad girl hadn't understood a word, she began to laugh until her slender body shook beneath the blanket. Finally, she said a few words, laughed again, and offered the young prince her red mouth—at least, Araton thought so. He didn't need a second invitation: he kissed the friendly mouth until strong hands pushed against his chest in protest—against too much, if not against everything. Catching his breath, Araton released her lips. Then he laid his head against the girl's breast and laughed on, until, in the midst of their laughter, the fortress cook drummed on the wooden wall and asked permission to enter.

"I knocked eight times, lord," he apologized for the noise, squinting with a sly grin toward the bed where someone was giggling and laughing.

"Yes, yes!" said Araton at the door. "I was a bit deaf just now—but the princess is to blame! She must have covered my ears because they were so cold."

The cook was an old, seasoned man and knew how such things went with the young. In his own youth, his cooking had often burned, for the same reason—someone had covered his ears too. That was long ago, but he remembered it with amusement.

The door shut, and the cook went back to the kitchen, lost in pleasant thoughts, while the prince fed his new conquest warm soup.

"First win their trust—then hold fast," he thought playfully.

When at last he turned to his own meal, devouring the long-missed warmth with hunger, he noticed that his new Zista had fallen asleep without a word of thanks, her face peaceful and kind, like that of a sheltered child—and that from the pillows came soft, comical little snores.

Edmund Kiß

DELUGE

Carefully, on tiptoe, the prince slipped out of the bedchamber and climbed, wrapped in three layers of fur, up toward the surface world.

There, in the ice-walled courtyard, stood the fortress captain beside several horses, each draped in warm blankets and prepared for the ride southward—to reach the foot soldiers of the Abessian realm. Torchbearers, shivering, lit the scene for the men who were to accompany the prince on his journey.

An uncanny, unfamiliar stillness hung over the fortress of white stone. No earthquake shook the kilometer-thick ice sheet in which it was buried; only the west wind howled with its familiar violence above their heads, mingled with snow and bursts of hail. It even seemed, strangely, that the wind had shifted slightly to the south, for it felt warmer than before. Araton shook his head. A south wind—here? Impossible. It must be a mistake. And besides, it was so dark that nothing could be clearly seen.

"It will not grow light, lord," said the captain uneasily. "Though twice already it should have turned day and night again. There, to the south, it stands black and thick as an impenetrable wall, and instead of the light of the sun and the glassy sea, something like a great hairy sack hangs in the sky. I beg you, wait until the darkness passes—it cannot last much longer, though I cannot explain this sight! You know, lord, we Northmen do not fear night or storm, but that black sky sends chills down my back!"

"Stranger still, it seems to me, is that the earthquake has fallen silent," replied Araton. "Does this happen often here—or is it something new?"

"That too has never been, lord."

Araton looked upward in wonder and disquiet at the pitch-black sky. Whistling sounds drifted through the unseen air like the voices of evil spirits; hissing, something shot past—swift, deadly, like invisible projectiles. From time to time there came dull impacts of dreadful force, though one could not see what they were or where they struck.

"They are hailstones the size of fists, lord," the captain explained. "I just picked one up that fell in the torchlight—jagged, sharp-edged, and so bitterly cold I had to throw it away at once, for I thought it was burning my hands."

Araton shook his head. Hailstones the size of fists? Such things only occurred, so far as he knew, in rare, violent tropical storms—never in the North!

Yet tonight they seemed to fall from the heavens in great numbers, and their speed made the dark air groan and whine.

With a whirring sound, something streaked just above the men, so close that they could feel the pressure of the air.

Raising his leather shield over his head, the prince stepped through the gate out of the fortress. He saw at once that in such darkness there could be no thought of riding out to meet his poor soldiers. A gnawing anxiety seized him at the thought of those brave men whom he could not reach or aid.

Reluctantly, the garrison soldiers followed him with their torches raised. The horses stayed behind, snorting in terror. An unseen missile thudded into one of the beasts' flanks; it collapsed at once and could not be made to rise again. Slaves hurried the remaining animals back into the stables of white stone.

Meanwhile, the men advanced across the gleaming snow, shields lifted, torches flickering in the gale.

"Where are you going, lord?" asked the captain anxiously.

"Southward," Araton answered, "where the low hills of the mainland rise. From there my soldiers must come—if they come at all. And it is not far; we can return quickly if the hail grows worse. It is so eerily still beneath our feet, as though the earth has finally tired of her dancing. I would almost wish the earthquake would begin again—as it once was."

"I will lead you then, my lord," said the captain, taking his place at the head of the small party. "I know the way even in the darkest night. Yet I believe we must go very, very carefully—for I do not know what has happened. I almost fear, my lord…"

The captain did not finish the sentence.

"What do you fear?" asked Araton, feeling a tightness in his throat. He realized he was afraid—an unmanly, terrible fear unlike anything he had ever known.

"I fear," the captain went on slowly, "that we shall never find solid land again, my lord—for it seems to me that we are drifting upon the water. I cannot say why I believe it, but I must speak it aloud."

"Drifting upon the water?" repeated Araton, shuddering as he thought of Jochaan's prophecies and of the jokes he himself had made at parting about the floating ice sheet. "Are we not standing firmly on frozen inland ice? And where could there be water great enough to lift such a colossal mass of white stone?"

"I do not know, lord," replied the captain through chattering teeth. Fear had seized him too. "I cannot explain it, but I am certain—we are drifting before the storm, eastward, perhaps even northeastward, though it sounds madness to think so. We are being carried away—who knows where?"

In silence, the men hurried on, crouching low, shields raised above their heads, the glowing torches held close to the ice.

With a shrieking wail, the dreadful sound of the falling hail tore through the night; dull impacts thudded all around in the snow, showering the men with icy shards. Slanting from the southwest, the singing projectiles swept almost horizontally through the darkness, striking the leather shields with heavy, muffled blows that staggered and threw down their bearers.

"Hold the planks tight!" shouted Araton, as another soldier fell and struggled back to his feet. His shield was shattered like a thin shell. Hailstones as large as human heads—jagged, dimly glittering chunks of ice—rolled across the snow.

Just as the prince was about to order a retreat, the roaring of the storming hail grew fainter, then died away.

"It's passing, men," Araton called, comforting his soldiers. They groped their way forward again through the night.

The red glow of the torches lit only a short stretch of the path ahead, so that each step came with tense anticipation of what might appear next.

Nothing but ice—ice gleaming red in the flicker of the flames, glittering in crystalline shimmer. Snow whirled down from the black heavens. Suddenly, with a snort, a massive beast burst out of the darkness, its trunk raised high, lumbered past the terrified men at a trot, and vanished like a phantom into the night.

"A lone mammoth!" exclaimed Araton in astonishment. "That is more than strange! Where in all the world might the rest of its herd be?"

No one answered the prince. But a nameless dread sat upon every man's neck like a wicked nightmare. Had the beast lost its herd—and why? These thick-skinned giants were intelligent, almost as clever as men, and in some things even cleverer. Such woolly titans did not stray from their kin without dire cause. The darkness alone could not be to blame—that the hunters and soldiers knew perfectly well.

There had to be another reason—but what?

Onward they went. Where were the low hills of solid land? Had they lost their way—missed their path?

The captain halted and gave a cry. Spreading his arms backward, he signaled the others to stop. His brown face was twisted with fear and horror.

"I hear the voice of great waters," he said hoarsely, "like the roaring of a sea!"

Breathless, their bodies tense, the men huddled together in mortal terror and listened into the storm's fury.

Araton took a torch from one of the soldiers and stepped forward hesitantly, one cautious step at a time.

A strange sound rose to meet him—a rushing, swirling, booming noise, as though from great depths, as if beneath his feet a gigantic fountain were gurgling in the dark.

Again he paused and listened. Yes—the sound came from below! From the depths welled the murmuring of water! The prince moved on, probing carefully, the torch held far ahead.

Suddenly its light fell into black nothingness—a sheer abyss yawned at his feet, dropping straight into dreadful, unseen depths.

The prince screamed aloud in terror. The torch slipped from his hand and scorched a wet patch in the snow before it hissed out.

"Jochaan! Jochaan!" cried Araton in despair.

The captain rushed to him and caught the staggering lord in his arms. The young prince pressed both hands convulsively to his face and sobbed in bewilderment.

"Why do you call upon the king's builder, my lord?" asked the captain, shaken.

"Because the time is fulfilled," Araton answered. His hands dropped; his wide-open eyes stared into the darkness. Was that not the bright figure of his friend standing there—beckoning with the crippled hand?

The captain stepped hesitantly to the edge and shone another torch downward.

Far below, in black, unfathomable depth, unseen and ghastly, murky water gurgled around the floating mass of white stone. From every fissure in the earth, groundwater burst upward in foul fountains and springs; endless torrents roared out of the night—monstrous floods, doubly dreadful because they could not be seen. Water—unceasing, rising water—swelled unstoppably from hidden deeps, lifting the immense sheet of inland ice from the bedrock until it floated like a raft.

Again, through the howling southwesterly gale, there shrilled a terrible siren sound—now like a high, clear ringing, now like the deep blare of a trumpet, swelling and fading.

"Whence come these voices from the sky?" the captain asked, stepping back from the abyss. His jaw hung slack; his lips were gray.

Araton straightened. The twisted lines of his face smoothed, as though fear had fallen away from him. Brightly, he thought he heard the voice of his friend!

"The voices of heaven tell us that the time is fulfilled," he said, his voice steady—almost joyful. "The last days of the glassy sea have come. It is falling—it crashes down upon men and beasts—it scatters its hail across the whole old earth to make it new again. We must return, captain—back, as fast as we can! My soldiers, whom I meant to seek, are lost to fate. I can save them no longer. Jochaan has drawn the second bolt across the homeland! We cannot reach them, nor they us. Whether they survive, I do not know. But we must strive to preserve ourselves. Back, then—to Jochaan's secure fortress upon the white stone!

Did not Jochaan say, when he built us these fortresses and laughed: 'I will give you a white stone'—did he not say so?"

The captain could no longer answer, for now the men had to run for their lives. Blocks of hail, each weighing hundreds of pounds, came crashing down with a terrible, ever-rising howl. Filthy rain of mud splattered and hissed into the white snow, sending up bloody red spray that pooled and slowly ate its way onward.

Each impact of those monstrous projectiles struck with annihilating force into the band of fleeing men, tearing deadly gaps through the last remnants of humankind in the final days of the old Earth.

No raised shield could protect the one whom death had chosen.

Five soldiers and the captain were missing when Araton, lungs burning, lay with his two surviving men beneath the protective ice of the fortress tunnel.

The booming of the hailstorm echoed dully, horrifically, down into the silent ice caverns, fading for a moment only to resume again with redoubled fury. Even the nerve-shattering wail of the heavenly missiles pierced the thick shell of white stone, making their hair stand on end and their jaws clatter in terror.

Crouched together, soldiers, their wives, and their children sat in the crystalline shelters, listening to the voices of the Flood raging above and below them—howling like the cries of furious demons, the roars of wild, malevolent spirits hunting for the last living beings to destroy.

Softly, majestically, the kilometer-thick ice sheet began to heave and breathe like a giant ship riding colossal waves. Rudderless, the immense natural vessel drifted northeastward on the rising waters of the deluge, which climbed higher and higher.

In the following days Araton sat at the mouth of the tunnel leading into the ice fortress, staring into the black, howling night. A detachment of soldiers worked in relays without rest, shoveling out the freezing red mud that trickled inward, threatening to choke the corridor and the stair. The iron-tainted sludge of the shattered moon piled tens of meters high upon the white-stone floe, forming a growing armored shell over Jochaan's fortress—its only shield against the plunging rocks and metal masses falling from the sundered core of the glassy sea. Yet even that armor might have availed little, had not the heavenly missiles tended to strike almost horizontally, losing most of their force for any direct downward blow.

Hour by hour new steps had to be cut into the frozen muck to keep near the surface; hour by hour the height of the stairwell grew. Tirelessly the soldiers dug through mud and ice at the entrances of both the royal wing and the barracks, fighting doggedly for air and life—for the continued existence of the human race.

Far off, a dim firelight glimmered, circling around the fortress—at times bright, at times faint.

"It is a mountain of fire, like the Peri," thought the prince with dread. "Only this one turns upon itself—or perhaps it moves in a great circle around us! Or… could it be that the ice floe itself, with my fortress upon it, is turning?"

Measureless, unknowable time slid by in endless darkness. The storm now came from the south instead of the west—but it was no longer icy cold; it blew warm and mild into the tunnel mouth, around the prince's head.

The hundred-pound hail fell more rarely now; instead, there rained almost nothing but slime and filth, red as blood and rust. The whole fortress lay buried beneath mountains of it. Ever nearer came the mountain of fire, casting

its dull glow through the murky, mud-choked air. At times the prince could make out the vast, crimson fountains leaping from the volcano's throat. Hour by hour—perhaps day by day, who could tell?—the mountain seemed to sink, or else the drifting ice sheet to rise. They must be very close to the flaming peak now, which no longer looked like a mountain at all, but like a low, burning island.

Thunderously, the columns of fire rose again from the surface of the sea; the floodwaters surged busily into the open crater and burst upward once more into the night in unheard-of explosions of steam and boiling mud. From above, heavy blows crashed down upon the ice floe. The drifting fortress rocked and swayed in slow, heaving motions. Darkness returned again—utter darkness—since the volcano had drowned, since the giant flood of the world's end had quenched its flame.

Through impenetrable blackness the white stone drifted northeastward with its living human cargo, while the howling southern storm hurled ceaseless rain of slime over Jochaan's fortress, so that the tunnel entrances could barely be kept open. Once, there came a tremendous jolt that flung Araton backward into the passage, sending him tumbling almost the whole length of the ice stair. Behind and before him the faithful soldier-beasts rolled and slipped.

"The white stone is wedged fast," said Araton when he had regained his footing. "Keep the tunnel entrance open until I return."

Carefully, his limbs aching, he climbed the steps and stepped hesitantly into the open. The rain of mud had thinned; the south wind roared warmly around his ears—almost hot, compared to the terrible cold he had endured when he rode toward Nordland. The night was black and dreadful; even the volcanoes of the earth seemed drowned beneath the waters of the incomprehensible deluge, which now poured northward without cease over lands that no human foot had ever trodden—lands where, in ages past, lack of air and killing frost had made life impossible.

Now the prince breathed deeply, greedily, of the dense, warm, living air, and only the hurricane-like rush of the unleashed atmosphere, pouring from the equator toward the north since the moon's destruction, sometimes snatched his breath away.

The ice floe began to jolt and sway. Somewhere it cracked, like an immense pane of breaking glass. The colossal sheet must have split apart.

"Good that I cannot see it," thought the prince. "Perhaps it is very near—or very far."

In vain the lonely watcher of the Flood tried to master the impenetrable darkness. Mud-rain streamed down his clothes; rivulets of filth, icy cold despite the warm air, trickled over him. Defiant, teeth clenched, the prince stood before the tunnel mouth.

Then a fiery glow flashed through the blackness—blue and sparking—and an uncanny wail like the cry of thousands upon thousands of sirens followed that dreadful light, echoing long after it had vanished. Far off, a resounding crash rolled through the night, as though a mountain had fallen from the heavens.

A terror unlike any he had ever known seized the prince; with a piercing scream he threw himself headlong into the tunnel. His soldiers helped him to his feet. They did not know what the prince had seen outside, but they too had heard the unearthly wail of the falling mountain.

Wide-eyed, knees trembling, Araton staggered past the men, stumbled down the endless stairs, and reeled into his chamber, whose walls shook and struck against one another as if about to shatter. A deep groan rolled through the primeval floe—then all was dead silent.

"The fortress drifts again," thought Araton, nearly senseless, as he sank onto his bearskins. "It must have been caught somewhere—now the mad journey continues… continues!"

"Araton!" came the voice of his young wife and princess from the sleeping room. She already knew her husband's name.

When no answer came, the woman of Nordland appeared in the doorway and looked in wonder at the man covered in grime, lying motionless on the furs, his face twisted with terror. Araton's wife wore a new dress of white wool, which she had sewn from the fortress's stores; around her hips she had bound one of her husband's feathered belts. Her bare white feet were tucked in warm fur shoes, and about her head she wore a bright ornament of colored shells.

As she washed the man and drew the dirt-stiff pelts from his body, Araton awoke and looked with astonishment upon his companion, who went about her task so calmly, so capable, without hesitation.

"I have not chosen a bad queen for myself," thought the prince with a weary smile. "Let it be all the same to me what happens outside—where the stars fall from the heavens, where the glassy sea is shattered and crashes upon the earth. Here with my young wife it is still and beautiful. I shall stay below now and rest, for I will go mad if I must behold that horror with my own eyes. Let the tunnel freeze shut! One must be blind, deaf, and numb to endure what I have lived through."

The princess smiled carefreely into his eyes as she wiped his head clean with dripping woolen cloths, speaking words he could not understand—but their meaning was clear enough, for they spoke of deep affection. Every spot of clean skin on his face received a careful kiss, as though sealing his cleansing with tenderness.

In that strange hour—while outside the Deluge howled across the tortured earth, while the old moon, torn apart by the earth's tidal force, plunged in fragments through the heavens; while the gates of the tropical ring-flood were open and world-encompassing ruin swept over the lands—the new Zista learned her first words in the Abyssian tongue.

They were not difficult to learn: "I love you." And as the two young people kissed, their mighty raft of hard, kilometer-thick ice rode the mountain-high floodwave over the crests of the Caucasus, whirling breathlessly upon the crown of a colossal surge into the plains of Russia and Siberia—at a speed against which that of modern express trains would have to be called a snail's crawl.

Outside, the floodgates of the Deluge were fully opened. Earth, sea, and air rushed onward together toward north and south—each as far as its nature would allow. The earth's crust contracted like an arch settling once its supporting frame was removed; the seas thundered toward the poles, along with the air, in a ring-shaped flood encircling the globe—but carried by the planet's rotation and deflected eastward. Thus Araton's ice floe came to rest for the first time in eastern Siberia, sinking into deep mud.

This occurred about a week after the rising groundwater at the northern Abyssian islands had imperceptibly loosened and lifted Jochaan's raft from the bedrock.

When Araton felt the gentle pushing jolt, he broke his resolve to remain always with his wife in their warm chamber and went out to the tunnel entrance—but found it sealed and frozen over with red iron-sludge, poured there in abundance by the falling moon.

The soldiers and their wives and children sat dull-eyed in their ice shelters, singing monotonous songs from their Abyssian homeland—a homeland they would never see again, for the waters were now too deep and the way too far.

The prince, with great effort, drew several men out and began with them to dig free the entrance. For two days pickaxes and shovels struck into the frozen muck, but the way remained closed, though one could already clearly hear the howling of the storm outside. Tirelessly the men shoveled, yearning to reach the open sky again.

But before they could finish their exhausting labor, the earthquakes ceased—and the raft began to float once more. Then the men stopped digging and looked at one another. The mad voyage was beginning again! Would it never end?

The encircling wave of the Flood had met itself at the poles and was returning—it lifted Jochaan's fortress upon its shoulders and bore it away once more halfway around the world, this time toward the southeast.

When Araton realized that their involuntary journey had begun anew, he ordered the digging halted for a while, though the slowly thickening air already pressed upon their lungs. He went to his fair-haired wife, who sat young and untroubled at the table in the living room, sewing. Her lips moved constantly—she was still learning the new language. I love you! She already knew the tone and the emphasis as well, as Araton quickly had occasion to confirm.

"Are you completely indifferent to our whole voyage?" asked the prince at last, when he had his mouth free again. He sat down beside his wife at the table and watched her with a kindly smile as she skillfully guided the bone needle.

The fair-haired woman shook her head and said simply:

"I love you, Araton."

In a way, that was the correct answer. Everything else truly was indifferent to her.

"Outside, the world is perishing, my Zista!" the prince continued their strange conversation. "The glassy sea is shattered, and we sail around the world not knowing where—or even whether—we shall ever reach land again. You can hardly imagine that destruction sweeps the earth, that it is being harvested by the sharp sickle, as Jochaan once said. The great dying has come; the time is fulfilled. Does all this not trouble you?"

"I love you," the woman smiled.

Araton looked quietly before him. How right this foolish foreign woman of the North was! She possessed the one triumphant wisdom—the power that gives birth to new races of humankind upon the earth: she loved. Love could not be shattered like the glassy sea; it endured as the highest law through ruin and terror.

Something like an immense ecstasy seized the soul of the lonely prince—whom not even his own wife could understand.

"Jochaan, Jochaan!" he cried out, burying his face in his hands.

Startled, the woman reached for Araton's head and drew it toward her; with her white, strong hands she stroked his hair—now, in a single week, turned gray like that of an old man—as though she were comforting a child, murmuring tender, incomprehensible words that sounded kind and gentle to the prince's ear. Araton lay silently upon the breast of his companion in fate and thought of the distant friend on the sacred mountain, who had told him he would not return—that perhaps it might be possible to live elsewhere upon the earth. Now Araton began to sense what manner of spirit that poor builder of the king had been—not only towering in intellect and clarity, but a true seer who had grasped the future with a sure hand; to whom a Higher Power had given the spirit of prophecy, that he might carry a remnant of humankind into the new age. Had that man foreseen that upon the white stone the preservation of entire races would be possible? Had he known that the Flood must come when the glassy sea broke and fell upon the earth?

You are greater than I believed, Jochaan, thought the prince. And yet I was your friend and thought I knew you completely. High among the rocks you built the caverns safe from earthquake and the fall of stars; and upon the white stone you raised the fortresses—vast floating bastions to withstand the breaking flood! Whole generations of humankind owe you, poor builder, their life and their future upon the new earth.

Meanwhile, Jochaan's fortress drifted on the returning floodwave, south-eastward over Alaska into the basin of the Atlantic Ocean. There, struck again by the wave rebounding from the equator, it was once more borne northeastward, gliding across the Pyrenees, through the land of France, and into central Germany—where the world-spanning, involuntary voyage of Prince Araton and his small people finally came to its end.

Because of the lack of air, the inhabitants of the fortress had already opened the tunnel entrances. Sometimes they cautiously raised their heads into the open air, but the storm still howled in pitch-black darkness. Yet it seemed that behind that impenetrable wall there was a comforting gleam of light—a glow that moved slowly, not restlessly and swiftly like the shattered glassy sea. The air was easy to breathe, though still cold; and in it was something that smelled of spring—a foreboding that better days had come.

When the battered, half-melted ice mass settled across the hills of what is now Thuringia, trembling faintly with the earth's subsiding convulsions, Araton was the first to crawl out of Jochaan's fortress into the dim light of the new age.

Gray tatters of cloud swept high across the sky, and one could see for hundreds of meters—a thing the prince had never thought possible from the Abyssian islands. Though drifting fogs and masses of cloud blocked the distance, though gusts of cold rain and sleet drove in from the south, it was plain that the world was changed—so much better that Araton, shaken to the soul, sank to his knees and, for the first time in many ages, prayed to the great spirit of Jochaan.

The tremors that would have driven the men of later ages to madness seemed to Araton now like a child's play compared to the endless quaking he had endured before the fall of the glassy sea. The storms still raging about him felt like gentle breezes when he thought of the days behind him. With nerves tempered and stretched by the merciless hammer of fate, he stepped forth beneath the new heaven and upon the new earth—for the first had passed away, and behold, all things had become new.

His small, shattered island of ice lay tilted against a mountainside, half-broken through, its other half propped against a neighboring hill whose peak vanished into drifting clouds. In the valley below, murky yellow water surged through the fracture in the white-stone floe, carving a broad and deep channel. Chunks of ice danced upon the rushing stream, swirling wildly into the flooded plain; even a thick tree trunk floated by, stripped of leaves and with splintered branches—it too had come a long way, until it swung around the broken floe and drove its roots deep into the mud.

Soon the entire garrison, with women and children, stood beside the entrances and gazed in silent wonder upon the never-before-seen sight—desolate and bare, without tree or shrub, without a living creature, and seemingly without any means to find sustenance.

In the midst of joy, heavy concern for the future mingled with the prince's thoughts. In the careworn faces of his men, in the sorrowful eyes of the women, the same silent question stood written: What now?

But too weary and exhausted to think, the little colony crept back into their ice caverns and slept—slept deeply and soundly for the first time in what seemed an eternity, sleeping for days without waking, in the blissful feeling of deliverance. Araton was no exception. His nerves, released at last from unrelenting tension, collapsed into the abyss—into the depths of oblivion, into the unfathomable chasms of dreamless sleep.

His young wife sat quietly and content beside his bed, now and then repeating with a happy smile the few words of love she had learned. Then she would speak softly to her sleeping husband in the language of her dead northern people, or gaze at the prince's grief-lined, pale face, framed by hair gone gray—

almost white—as witness to a time that had turned young men old in only a few days.

Whenever the ice floe shifted or jolted under the still but dwindling tremors, the prince stirred and murmured words the princess could not understand—but always, always the name Jochaan returned: the name of the friend from the sacred mountain, from whom lands and seas now separated the sleeper forever.

"The doves!—Feed the doves!" murmured Araton.

Unease passed over his face. His promise haunted him even in sleep—the vow he had made to his friend, to send carrier pigeons once all had passed that Jochaan had foreseen and foretold. The princess stroked the gray crown of her young husband's head and rose to fulfill his wish, for she already knew the word dove, having helped Araton feed them daily.

Now and again, a man or a woman poked a head into Araton's chamber, then withdrew again at the princess's gesture. Strange, half-human sounds echoed faintly through the tunnels and passages of Jochaan's fortress—swelling and subsiding, at times like shouts of joy, at times like ecstatic weeping.

The sounds would not cease. Clearly the woman from the North heard the children rejoicing, heard playful words and the laughter of women outside the door. Her curiosity awoke. What could all this mean? Since coming to the fortress, she had heard no laughter—save her husband's, who now lay in deep oblivion.

For a while she hesitated, unsure whether to leave Araton alone. Then she quickly climbed up toward the exit and stepped into the open—only to cry out in terror, blinded by what she saw. She scrambled back into the darkness of the ice cave and crouched fearfully by the entrance to Araton's sleeping chamber.

She tried to think.

What terrible thing had happened? Why had she run back instead of remaining outside like the others—those who had climbed out of the dark fortress into the warm, fresh air beneath the open sky?

Why were the others shouting in wild joy, crying out in rapture that could only discharge itself in mad dancing and laughter? Why, suddenly, had she herself felt the urge to cry out for sheer delight?

She had seen an overwhelming bright light—warmly shining upon her like the gentle caress of a loving hand—a light so radiant and pure that she had

foolishly closed her eyes in sudden fright and fled back into the darkness of the cold tunnel.

The fair-haired princess peered cautiously into the sleeping chamber.

Araton lay motionless on the cushions, not even moving his lips. His deep, even breathing showed he was lost in unconscious sleep. Then, seized by a joy she had never known, the princess darted again through the tunnel, stumbling in her haste up the worn, filthy ice-steps—and a moment later she stood in silent wonder before the sun, which hung steep and high in the southern sky like a glowing orb.

She, the nomad's daughter of the North, had never seen the sun—had scarcely even sensed it, dim and veiled behind the overpowering glare of the glassy sea and the heavy clouds. Now the clouds were almost gone, the glassy sea no more, and only the radiant, warming ball of fire hovered far above, quiet in the infinite blue—clear and transparent as the waters of a spring, as the crystal of the continental ice that had once been her home.

Her enchanted gaze swept over mountains and hills; had the low range on the horizon not stood there, she might have seen to the very end of the world.

Everywhere upon the slanted ice mass, black, fur-wrapped figures swarmed. Children screamed their joy into the warm spring sunlight, men and women tore the furs from their bodies in wild ecstasy, dancing naked in the light of the sun.

On the crest of the hill where the ice sheet leaned, small human figures waved and shouted as though possessed; others clambered upward through cracked, yellow mud, and when they reached the top, they too cried out no less than the first.

Even on the opposite slope there was a black, teeming bustle of movement, and from there the shouting of joy rolled down into the valley—so loud and wild it became almost frightening.

Something extraordinary must have happened up there, thought the princess. I must try to wake Araton from his endless sleep—for what I have to show him, he surely has never seen before.

But she could not yet tear herself away from the wonders that dazzled her eyes. Two white gulls swept with plaintive cries along the muddy banks of the river below, searching and finding food among the stranded sea creatures that the Flood had cast ashore—among the snails and shells that only weeks before had lived their dull lives upon tropical coasts.

The thin, ragged horses that had survived the great voyage grazed amid heaps of seaweed and algae, eating them from sheer hunger, or gnawed the bark from branches washed ashore—branches half buried in the mud that the shattered glassy sea had spread across the world, giving the new humanity a fertile clay soil to till.

Wolf-dogs tore greedily at the dead fish lying now upon the land, left behind by the retreating waters; and several scruffy chickens scratched excitedly in the drying muck for roots and soft snails.

Queer remnants of southern palms stood askew in the hollow of a narrow ravine, and beneath them blue smoke rose straight upward from a fire, vanishing high in the wind. There, the new people were cooking a midday meal from Jochaan's stores in the open air, working busily—for they had scarcely thought of food for weeks and were famished like wild beasts long deprived of prey.

The young princess sat, without realizing it, nearly the entire afternoon before the tunnel entrance, lost in wonder, until the sun stood low in the west. Araton had quietly stepped behind her and placed his arm about her shoulders. His face was calm and bright, for he already knew what the people upon the ice sheet and hillside had found, and why they had shouted with such unbounded joy.

One of his men had come through the soldiers' tunnel to him, waking him and reporting that an enormous herd of mammoths, woolly rhinoceroses, deer, and bears had shared the primeval voyage upon the ice mass—and now sat frozen side by side in the deep ice-mud, preserved as food for many years to come, unspoiled and incorruptible, for even the warm sun would need years to melt the thick frozen layers in which those beasts lay—like stores in a colossal, natural icehouse.

Araton looked around him.

There, upon the flat plain of yellow clay, he planned to sow, as soon as possible, the grain from Jochaan's storerooms. The immediate future of his small people seemed secure now that he knew the bounty of flesh that a merciful fate had carried with him around the world on the same drifting ice.

In the east, clouds rose, and in the far distance one could see the rain descending like gray veils—then, arching from earth to sky and back again, a wondrous band of color appeared. All the people in the valley and upon the heights fell silent and gazed at the miracle they had never before seen.

Then Araton felt it as though a distant greeting from the friend upon the sacred mountain had brushed against him.

I will do what I promised you, Jochaan, thought the prince. I will send you a carrier dove! Perhaps it will find the way to you—or perhaps not—for the earth is new and strange, and even the wise doves may no longer know the path they must fly to reach you. But I will do it, for so much has proven possible that I scarcely dared to believe; and so I shall believe that this miracle too may come to pass!

That evening, Araton's dove fluttered into the dark blue sky, circled searchingly above the mountain and the ice sheet, and then sped away—southward—to seek Jochaan, the builder of the new earth.

Edmund Kiß

The Falling Star

When Jochaan awoke, darkness surrounded him.

Horrific tremors of the earth made his wounded head strike against hard stones, so that he rose in unbearable pain, groping about with his crippled hands.

Some living creature pressed against his body, growling and whimpering pitifully without pause—but he could not see what kind of beast it was, for Jochaan had gone blind from the hard blow of Galmon's axe.

The scholar ran his hand along the creature's body and thought: "It is Sperr, the hound that Zista sent me from the sacred mountain. But how did I come here? Why can I not see? And why do my pulses race with fever, so that I no longer know what has happened to me?"

The dog howled. The builder listened intently. Was that not another dog's howl, far away in the distance?

Then, carefully, he reached for the restless messenger of the king's sister and grasped him by the neck.

"Sperr, old faithful friend," Jochaan said sadly. "Are you all alone with the poor builder, to show him the way back to his dwelling on the sacred mountain? Is there no man with me? I seem to remember that a great crowd of people stood around me—yes, when that dull blow struck my head and cast me down."

With uncertain hands, Jochaan felt around. Then he tried to call out, but no one answered. In his ears there was a roaring like surging water; far away, he could hear the dull thunder of the fiery mountains and the booming explosions beneath the earth's crust. Through the air came shrill, nerve-lashing tones like howling song—though to the scholar's ruined hearing they sounded faint and distant.

Then Jochaan suddenly knew that the time was fulfilled, and that the glassy sea was about to fall upon the earth.

"Once I wished that I might not see the horror with my eyes nor hear it with my ears, for I feared I could not endure it," he thought sadly. "Now that wish is granted, for some fool has shattered the shell in which the waking senses dwelt and worked without rest.

Jochaan, king of the new earth—fate has drawn the boundary. My life was longing and unrest; now fulfillment is locked away from me."

With effort, he stood and sought his way, staggering. With both hands he tried to wipe the ghastly darkness from his swollen, blood-soaked eyes, but could not; at last he let his crippled arms sink and leaned hopelessly against the rock.

"Since it cannot be otherwise, I shall be glad that my hearing too is almost destroyed," he said with bitter laughter. "It suits well enough to my eyes, which are now blind. Have all men forsaken me?

Araton, Araton—now for the first time I know what solitude is. Solitude is, and remains, beautiful and desirable—but abandonment is barren, for it is unbearable.

I have never believed the great Spirit to be a god of mercy, yet it seems unbrotherly of him to leave me thus utterly alone."

The dog gave a fearful howl and pushed the king's builder impatiently with his muzzle.

"Yet I have wronged him," thought the broken man. "Is not the dog still with me—the symbol of fidelity? Then the Master of the World has still kept faith, and I am sorry to have called him unbrotherly. I am not dead yet, so I will wait to see if he has kept one joy in store for me, and I will fight for that joy until the final moment.

And if you destroy me, you ruler of the world, you law of loveless love, then grant that Araton, my friend, may reach the goal that is denied to me. If you are a great builder, as I was a small one, help him to raise the new earth—since I can no longer do it."

Again the little princess's hound barked and tugged at him with fierce impatience. Smiling faintly, Jochaan grasped the animal's collar and let himself be led, though his feet stumbled in the dreadful quaking of the ground, and even Sperr fell often, flung down by the heaving earth. Together man and beast rose again and crawled up the eastern slope of the sacred mountain—above them, across the jagged cliffs, the shattered fragments of the moon swept by in a near-horizontal flight, roaring like hellish thunder before plunging into the valley far below.

Jochaan did not know that the rocks of the holy mountain groaned and bent beneath the strain of the trembling earth, nor that avalanches crashed before and behind him; he did not see the enormous wild beasts that, in their terror, ran the same path beside him—forgetting to harm either the king's builder or the faithful hound.

Only when the dog snarled and snapped at a clumsy bear that tried to shove the scholar from the path did Jochaan realize that he was not alone with Sperr. He could not see the small, comical monkey dancing behind him, who, trusting in the dog's sure guidance, followed the same road to safety.

Jochaan would surely have laughed, had he known, that the great Spirit was playing a grim jest—joining together an ape, a hound, and the builder of the new earth in a fellowship of fate.

"Come with me, you poor creatures of the old world," said the broken man with deep emotion, trembling with fever and half out of his mind. "Jochaan has built caves for you too," he said, "as the great Spirit commanded him—so that new generations may flourish in his kingdom of the new Earth. Come with me up to the sacred mountain, where Zista dwells—my little royal sister. She will care for you when I sleep; she will feed you when you are hungry.

Ah, how the pain bores into my temples! Strange, colored rings are dancing before my eyes, though I truly cannot see anything! … A pity—I would have liked to witness it after all, how the glassy sea crashes down upon the old Earth and upon mankind. Now all is black, and I hear only a distant humming and wailing I never heard before. Am I never content? Am I not better off than these animals? May I not walk beside Sperr without asking where the road to salvation leads? … How strange—my head feels so large, a huge sphere spinning around itself, full of bright sparks! … Not so fast, Sperr! The king's builder has grown a little old and lacks the great World-Architect who might make him new again.

Perhaps that will yet come. Is he not my brother—the great Spirit, a builder like myself? If I were in his place, I too would not trouble myself about the speck of dust that is Jochaan, if I were playing ball with the Moon and Earth! The man is quite right—I ask too much … How soft the rocky ground feels, as though carpets lay beneath my feet—or flowers, like those that grow in the Queen's gardens … Sperr, are you leading me through the soft air or across the chasms and depths of the beautiful Earth I loved, the less habitable it became? … Are you leading me to Araton, my friend, northward through the gentle, silent snow? … Will he send the doves I gave him? The road is so long! … I see their wings beating, see them grow weary and turn back to the prince—because the world has changed, and they no longer know the way!"

Disjointed fragments of thought flickered through the wounded scholar's mind, drifting here and there without anchor or sense. Bright, swaying visions floated past him—blooming meadows and quiet green forests over which white clouds wandered, like friendly tales from ages past or yet to come. The little royal sister stood afar off and waved her slender brown arms; the gems on her fingers sparkled in the radiant sunlight.

Jochaan laughed and waved back.

"Yes, wait for me—I'm coming to you, you supple, splendid creature, lovely queen of my new Earth! Don't you see? I can see again! Look at my clear, bright eyes, Zista! And see, even my crippled hands are straight and smooth now—the ugly knots on my arms have vanished too. How well you have done your work! I shall never again mock your art of healing—it has only taken time for all to be restored. And now I care little whether the Earth is round or not. Since I have you, I no longer ask such things; for I cannot prove them, and the red corks never returned that I once cast into the sea in foolish hope they might come back from the West—dancing upon the vast ring-tide of the ocean that roars past my homeland as it does here at the Abessian Isles. Now all that once stirred me is gone—longing and restlessness both—and I too will live for once! Till now I have only worked and cared for others; from this day forth I shall care for myself and for you, my Zista, for if I wait much longer it will be too late—and youth and all joy will have passed."

The mountain crouched and sank many meters into the depths, so that man and beast fell together and tumbled among the rocks. Jochaan's hand remained clenched in Sperr's fur—he knew not that he did so—and thus he escaped the fall into the abyss that yawned beside the mountain path.

Floods of red mud streamed down from the heights—thick, icy sludge poured by the shattered glassy sea upon the sacred mountain. But the wolfhound did not think of giving up the struggle, though the builder lay half buried in the vile red slurry, unable to rise. Sperr remembered the command of his little mistress: to bring the scholar back—or not to return at all.

So he pulled and tugged at the unconscious man, dragging him onward without rest. Progress was slow—marked by short pauses filled with the hound's mournful howls—but in the roaring inferno of the world's ending, they were swallowed like a breath.

Again the sacred mountain sank with a jarring motion. The sandstone crunched in its layers, and bright fire burst from the fissures. A mass of rock slid majestically past another—gliding down upon shattered stonefolds as the Earth's crust groaned under the retreating flood of the glassy sea.

All around, the mountains blazed with dreadful light and spewed towering cones of flame into dense clouds of mud—clouds mingled mercilessly with rock fragments and chunks of ore, rushing in near-horizontal torrents from west to east with thunderous clamor. Yet in the storm-shadow of the mountain's vast eastern wall no hail fell, no stone descended—save for the rubble cascading from the weary cliffs themselves.

Sperr had no time to concern himself with the downfall of the old world. In his simple heart there lived only one thought: to fulfill the command of his little mistress. Yet at last he stood helpless, his flanks quivering, beside the motionless body of the scholar beneath a deeply leaning overhang of rock, and he cried out in despair at a task that now seemed beyond all strength.

Jochaan lay still upon his back, knowing nothing of the horror around him. Deep unconsciousness veiled his restless spirit, and he dreamed of quiet nights and starry skies, of happiness and love, of health and the exultation of life—of mighty, creative labor upon the new Earth, where he was to be king among a free people.

Something darted down the slope through the thick, flowing mud—pressed close to the rocks, with a supple body and slender brown limbs. Sharp, black eyes searched the shattered mountain path, measuring the ledge that the earthquake had torn into the familiar road.

Swiftly it climbed—like a small, nimble panther—tireless and fearless amid the world's ruin. For there was one thing over which the glassy sea had no power, one force against which the fury of the collapsing world broke: love, which the Master of the Solar Wheels had set as the highest law above space and time, that in destruction and peril life might not perish—the life that was to build the new Earth.

Thus Zista found the king's builder.

He was unrecognizable—covered in mud and filth, in blood and wounds—but she knew it was Jochaan she had found, and that was enough. The girl cried out in rapture and joy when she realized that her beloved still breathed.

"Jochaan! I found your cork—do you hear me? The cork that drifted from the west, like a little duck from the high sea! Now you must come with me to our home upon the mountain! Stop leaping and howling!"

She pushed away Sperr's wild excitement.

"Come, help me lift him instead—we must carry him up, it's not far now. Rise, Jochaan, and come with me! I am only little Zista—your royal sister who loves you, you poor, wise man!"

Jochaan's hand was still clenched in Sperr's thick fur and would not let go. Zista took her beloved beneath one arm and heaved him upward, his bloody head hanging low. Sperr too began to pull with all the strength he had left. Muffled, unintelligible words seemed to escape the builder of the holy mountain, but they were lost amid the chaos—like every human and animal sound.

Mechanically he began to crawl, unable to rise. Slowly, dog and girl dragged the mortally wounded man upward toward the saving caves.

Brave slaves stood above and helped haul the king's builder up the broken steps.

When Jochaan lay at the entrance of the crowded cave, he regained consciousness for a moment. He felt that he rested upon soft, thick furs, and that his bloodied head was cradled warmly in a girl's lap—so that he would not strike the stones when the immense quake hurled the last survivors of the old Earth about.

Zista bent over the man she loved and wrapped her arms protectively around his head. Then she saw a peaceful light spread over his mutilated, blood-streaked face, and his lips moved faintly. Though he could not see, he recognized the little royal sister; for she whispered foolish, tender words into his ear—words he could not hear, but whose meaning somehow reached his fading mind.

He understood now: the king's daughter loved him—him, the poor slave and builder of the king. She had rescued him from ruin and saved him again, as once before, when he had been cast ashore from a ship out of faraway America, his homeland, upon the beaches of the Abessian Isles.

Deep in the cave, the survivors swarmed like shadows—the people who had fled to the sacred mountain when the massive hail of ice began to fall, torn first from the crust of the shattered moon and hurled in shrieking arcs from west to east upon the Earth.

The king sat dazed on the ground, eyes black and empty, beside him a foreign woman from Tulma, whose withered lips moved ceaselessly as if praying to some unknown power for deliverance. Galmon sat wrapped in furs amid the heap of his soldier beasts, howling a mad song of terror. Foam flecked his aged, twisted face, and his bloodshot eyes stared toward the cave entrance—where Jochaan and Zista had made their bed of furs.

Bloody firelight flickered through the narrow fissure that opened to the outside—still unsealed—and lent a ghastly glow to the voices of the world's ending, those voices like the rising, nerve-rending howls of falling giants' bombs, finding their tortured echo within the cavern.

Amid the screaming crowd of soldiers' wives and children lay the queen Aramut—pale and motionless. Her head rested in Nephat's arms, and he stared into emptiness, his eyes wide and unblinking.

"Where is Jochaan?" the queen asked for the hundredth time, her voice faint.

The high priest of the sacred beast rolled his eyes in torment.

"I do not know, lady," he stammered, his mouth trembling. "When you collapsed and could go no farther—let alone carry the wounded man—I left him behind and saved you. I know nothing more."

"Go out and find him, Nephat!" begged the queen, trying weakly to lift her hand in supplication. "Why did you leave him? Was he not crushed and helpless? How could you bear to abandon him and save only me?"

The priest cried out like a tortured animal.

None but the slaves who lay near the entrance of the rock dwelling knew that Jochaan was already inside. Hardly anyone had noticed how, for a brief moment, the opening had darkened—when the scholar crept in with Zista and the dog.

With a thunderous crash, the mountain collapsed in upon itself. The floor of the cave tilted sharply, sending the people sliding together like helpless, lifeless bodies. They screamed in terror, struggling and trampling one another, each trying to escape from the convulsing heap of flailing human limbs.

Yet Jochaan's rock chamber held firm overall. Together with the massive mountain block, the dwelling of the last humans of the pre-diluvian age sank deeper and deeper under dreadful jolts, as the shattered glassy sea continued to dissolve and released the swollen equatorial bulge from the grip of its gigantic flood pressure.

The king lay beneath the writhing mass of his subjects, his legs broken, his mad howls echoing unheard. Galmon had fallen upon the high priest of the wounded beast, who shielded the queen with his body in the corner by the hearth. Blood trickled from the priest's nose and mouth, but he still clasped the queen tightly—she who carried the future of the Abessian royal line—protecting her from blows and trampling feet.

Zista braced her small feet against the frame of the cave's narrow entrance. Her brown back arched over the man to whom her heart belonged. She held him with all the strength of her young arms. Her ear rested upon his lips, listening to what the king's builder muttered in his fever.

"I hear a great voice," said Jochaan.

Zista nodded and glanced outward for a moment, timidly, into the raging destruction of the world. Far below in the valley, fragments of the moon crashed down with unbearable thunder—an avalanche of burning mountains and blood-red mud. The air rushed in hot and smoky through the narrow fissure. Only one sound was missing amid the chaos—the roar of the nearby sea, as if the waters had mysteriously vanished.

"Do you hear the trumpet that announces the final things, Zista?" asked the scholar, his voice gasping and failing.

"I see hail mingled with fire and blood," he murmured, "and it falls upon the Earth—and the third part of the trees is burned, and all green grass is burned. Do you hear the trumpet, Zista?"

"Yes, Jochaan, I hear," the girl replied softly, bending again over her poor, delirious beloved as warm tears dripped onto his blood-smeared, battered brow.

"Listen, how the trumpet resounds, Zista! This is the end of the old Earth—she is being reaped. The sickle cuts. Only you and I shall remain; only you and I shall endure and enter the new glory. Look, Zista—there! The falling star! There falls the star of Jochaan! It descends like a great burning mountain into the sea, and a third part of the sea becomes blood. A great star falls from heaven—don't you see it, Zista? It burns like a torch and plunges upon the rivers and fountains of the Earth. And the name of the star is Wormwood, and the waters are made bitter."

The child screamed aloud.

High above, in the black heavens, an enormous flaming star came hurtling down toward Earth with a deep howl and roar. The valleys and mountain walls shone like day beneath its intolerable brilliance. Like a gigantic torch, the star burned in white and bluish fire; showers of sparks hissed from the roaring meteor, which grew monstrously large in moments, its tongues of flame lashing across the entire sky. The howl of the falling star swelled into a hellish hurricane of such force and fury that for a short time all the wailing in the cave fell silent. Clawing hands seized their neighbors' bodies in insane terror; wild, maddened eyes rolled blindly in the dark.

Then came the final thunderous crash.

The sacred mountain leapt into the air like a ball and collapsed again. Compressed air burst through the cave fissure with an explosive crack; deep within the ancient rock seams came a muffled, despairing groan.

Far, far away—where once the sea had lain—the star must have fallen, many thousands of meters from the doomed humans. A slowly growing, blood-red glow spread through the black night of horror, as though the star had pierced the Earth's crust like a thin shell, and now the flaming blood of the Earth welled up from the dreadful wound, burning like a beacon above the vast grave of that fallen fragment—born from the iron core of the shattered old moon.

The people no longer screamed.

Silent and numb, they crouched or lay where the violent tremors had thrown them—bleeding, torn, with broken limbs—some driven mad by horror and pain, others fainted from fear and terror.

Between fits of choking and vomiting, the king sang a wild, foolish song of mirth; young women swayed their upper bodies in dancing motions whenever they caught fragments of that eerie dance tune. Only Galmon still screamed and raged like one possessed, calling for Jochaan.

"Where is the king's builder?—Jochaan, come and help us!—Why is there blood on my battle-axe? King! King! Do you see it flying toward the saint's brow? But I did not do it, Jochaan! How can you believe that old Galmon struck you down with the axe—the one who was your friend from the moment he met you? Who slays his friend with an axe? Jochaan, Jochaan, it wasn't me! Weren't we to feast and drink together when the last things came—when the time was fulfilled?

Jochaan, if you were here, we would take the ram's shank from your stores and sit at the table with Araton, the good prince. And if the world were breaking apart, we would dine like kings and never let the cups grow empty before a stronger one comes! But Jochaan, Jochaan—why don't you answer your friend anymore?"

"Shut your mouth!" roared Nephat in frothing rage, striking the old warlord in the face so that he fell to the ground and rolled groaning amid the quake, muttering incoherently.

The sick queen's voice whimpered softly—unheard, unheeded by the men.

"Where is Jochaan? Help me find Jochaan!"

The high priest bent his ear toward Aramut, but only the faintest breath of a broken plea reached him: Jochaan!

"Speak no more of Jochaan!" he screamed in despair.

"The sea has swallowed the builder, or the stones have crushed him completely—he is dead, gone from the Earth! Do not ask me again for that man, queen, or I'll strangle you myself!"

White foam clung to the priest's lips. The cry for Jochaan tortured him—the unbearable cry of love and devotion that shone toward that man even amid the world's convulsions.

Meanwhile Jochaan whispered faintly into Zista's bent ear:

"I hear voices and thunder and lightning," he said.

"And there is a great earthquake, such as never was since men were upon the Earth—so mighty an earthquake, and so great! And the islands flee away, and the mountains are not found, and all things—all things—are made new.

Now has come the new Heaven over the new Earth, for the first Heaven and the first Earth are passed away, and the sea is no more. Do you see the great city? It is four-square, and its length is as great as its breadth. There we shall dwell, my beloved queen! The wall is built of jasper, and the city is of pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of its walls are adorned with all manner of precious stones, and its gates are of pearl, and its streets are gold. No temple shall we build there, my beloved—for the great almighty Spirit who has guided me upon this Earth shall be our temple."

The little royal sister could scarcely hear his words; his voice was thin and faint, overpowered by the roaring voices of nature in the blood-red night of the world's end.

Zista pressed her tender lips to the hollowed cheek of the scholar, held his wounded head in her gentle hands, and shielded him tirelessly from the earth's brutal shocks.

For days she crouched, huddled over the king's builder, listening for breath upon his lips—feeling, with a kind of holy rapture, the uneven, gasping rise and fall against her arm that lay softly across his broad chest.

Zista listened only for the life she held in her arms, not for the thunder or the shattering of the glassy sea.

The tortured man's lungs rattled as he breathed.

Once, he awoke fully.

"It is dark, Zista," he whispered softly into her ear. "Take the cloth from my eyes so that I may see what has happened. Have you also bound up my ears, Zista? I hear only a faint, distant rushing."

The child burst into bitter sobs.

"You cannot see, Jochaan, because I press your eyes to my breast—so that no harm will come to you. Sleep on, Jochaan. Your little Zista keeps watch for you."

The scholar shook his head, his bloody face twisting painfully at the movement. He felt against the child's breast, with his cheek, how Zista spoke, yet he could not understand the words she said.

"Give me water," he murmured. "I am perishing of thirst."

"I have nothing, Jochaan."

The wounded man stirred weakly in her arms and began murmuring of his homeland, which he had been forced to leave—of the clear springs that welled from the mountains there.

How shall I get water? thought Zista, full of fear. The cave is packed tight with screaming, raving people, and the stores of ice are in the other chamber, whose entrance is blocked by the mad.

If only I had even a piece of ice for Jochaan!

He has fallen asleep again, thought the girl joyfully. But I cannot let go of him to fetch ice—for the tremors would dash his poor dear head, so wise and kind, and I must protect it so that he may be again as he once was.

She turned to a slave lying near her and begged him to crawl through the crowd to fetch ice—it lay in the rear chambers, in Jochaan's storerooms.

The man only stared at her blankly and remained silent. Though thirst tormented him too, he would not move, would not crawl through the dense, writhing mass of desperate, half-mad people to fetch the precious relief.

So Zista leaned as far as she could out of the cave entrance and broke off a piece of icy sludge from the stones outside. But it tasted foul and bitter, like wormwood, and she spat it out at once.

No, that is not for Jochaan! she thought. If only he does not wake again soon and ask for water! How shall I bring him water, when all reason has fallen from mankind like crumbling plaster?

Again the mountain sank deeper, and within the bowels of the Earth there sounded confused groaning and roaring. The cave rocked, tilting even more steeply. A crushed boulder fell from the massive ceiling with a thunderous crash into the heap of living misery. No hand stirred to help the woman pinned beneath it, who rolled her black, crazed eyes as death's waxen mask settled upon her face. Zista glanced at that dreadful sight and breathed in relief when the woman's head fell limp and she died.

The royal sister bent lower still over the man she loved, holding him tight in her trembling arms. With her feet she braced herself against the falling stone gate, now almost level with the ground. The south wall of the cave had become the floor, and the heavy hearth—its fire long since extinguished—now hung strangely upon the wall that had once been the ground. High above, wedged behind the hearth, the priest of the sacred beast still held the queen tightly in his arms with grim devotion. Galmon had rolled farther away and now lay gasping beneath his soldiers.

Once, a piece of ice was passed forward from the rear chamber, but the little that reached the front melted away under the greedy hands of those nearby. None of it came to Zista and Jochaan, though the child screamed and pleaded. Her small voice was lost amid the cries of terror from the doomed crowd and the roaring collapse of the glassy sea.

She tried to wake Sperr, who slept beside her—but she could not, for the faithful helper slept now the sleep from which none can be awakened.

In dreadful torment the hours and days slipped away.

Jochaan murmured feverishly, groaning in pain.

"Why do you give me nothing to drink, Zista?" he asked once, very clearly, as though he were awake and well.

"I have nothing," replied the royal sister in torment.
A harsh, rattling breath escaped Jochaan's mouth.

"There is ice in the rear chambers, Zista," he whispered. "Why do you not fetch it? It is only a few steps! If it were not so dark, I would go myself. The others must drink too, Zista! That is why I gathered and stored the pure ice — so that we would have water in times of need. You need only melt it by the fire. Must I tell you even the simplest things? Call Araton — let him take over, for I cannot do it now, though I do not know what has happened to me that I cannot. Araton is wise and knows my dwelling well. He shall continue my work once more, and then he may ride north to his homeland. Do not forget to tell him also to send me the dove he promised. But the dove will not return, just as the corks

did not come back. You see, Zista, I cannot prove that the Earth is a sphere like the glassy sea — yet still I am certain that it is, as I have told you. What does it matter if men do not believe it? It remains true nonetheless! The Earth does turn, Zista! I am not mad — you must not believe the people who say so. Look how the surf runs against the rocks, turbid and dirty from the whirl of the rushing ocean current that circles the great ball of the Earth! Once, I myself played the cork — but a lovely brown child drew that cork to the shores of her homeland, and the voyage of the living cork was ended. I knew nothing then, for I was captive, a servant, a builder of the king. Then I sent out other corks, messengers to bring me word — many, many envoys who swim around the Earth in swift currents, who will not shatter in the surf as I did! But I could never see, to gain certainty for my faith; not one of the red corks ever returned — only the longing for proof remained, forever unfulfilled. But the dove of Araton will return, do you not think so, Zista? The great Spirit cannot be so cruel as to mock utterly my faith and my labor."

The royal sister wept as Jochaan spoke. Her tears fell upon his lips, and he eagerly drank the salty wetness.

"You give me little to drink, my child," Jochaan continued softly. "It tastes of salt — of tears — warm, and not unpleasant. But perhaps I am mistaken, for why should you weep? It tastes almost like warm blood, this drink you give me, Zista! But I understand — you have no more yourself, and I will be content, though I burn within.

Those drops tasted like salty red cork, Zista, as though the little sealing-cup of the drinking vessels — enough for a dove, but too little for the king of the new Earth.

You know, child, I shall set a precious reward for whoever brings me back my cork, for I am king and lord and can call upon the riches of the Earth to reward the finder. What prize shall I proclaim, little Zista? Help me think, my queen — what shall the finder receive?"

"The cork is found, Jochaan!" the girl sobbed, half beside herself — but the scholar could no longer hear her voice, for Galmon's axe had been too heavy.

Jochaan laughed softly, his broad chest trembling against the girl's small breast.

"Do you remember, Zista, what I promised you? If someone came and brought me the cork? I would kiss you as often as you desired! Now you have long been my queen, and have kissed me so often that my promise is repaid a hundredfold — your children play in the flower garden of our court — yet the cork was never brought."

Then Zista pressed her trembling lips upon the man's mouth. Again the king's builder laughed softly, full of peace and happiness.

"I know, my wife — you wish to comfort me, because I am so terribly foolish and harbor such childish hopes. But now that the Earth is still, and the new Heaven blue and full of sun, the cork will never return — for Heaven and Earth are strange and changed, and the sea is no more. Yet still I am right, Zista — only, I cannot prove it. That has been the pain of my life… though I do not know if you understand it."

The royal sister untied the little piece of red bark she had kept hidden at her waist and placed it into Jochaan's twisted hand. She felt how the scholar's fingers gently traced its surface.

A faint sigh reached her ear.

"Yes, Zista… my corks felt something like this," he said softly, sorrowfully. "Give it to our boys to play with — it is a more serious toy than they will know. Many, many generations must pass before another man comes to tell mankind that the Earth is a sphere. But one day that time will come — and men will believe him! No one believed me — not even those who loved me. I think I lacked time; with more time, I might have succeeded. Time is not everything, but it is much. After all, it no longer matters. I have you and the children, and I rule over a free, happy people. You see, Zista — it can be done without slaves. It is enough that I have led you and many others through the collapse into a better age. Great mercy has the Spirit shown me, that I should at least live to see this. There was a time when I thought He would deny me everything. You will not forget what I told you, Zista? Watch every carrier dove that flutters through the garden — that is important, very important! I will not lose faith in the improbable. So much has come true that we once thought impossible, things that now seem like legend to us. Do not grow weary, my wife — your king still keeps one foolish hope, even if all else has dissolved like fleeting mist. Araton… Araton!"

The red cork slipped from the scholar's clenched hand and rolled out into the open, along the slanting ground.

Zista did not try to reach for it or stop it. A deep sadness had come over her.

Silently she held the beloved man in her slender brown arms—without hope, utterly without hope.

Jochaan moved his lips soundlessly. The royal sister bent her ear close and listened intently.

"Water! … Water!" she heard, as if from far away.

The child's eyes wandered, bewildered and desperate, to the heap of people in the dark cave.

Should she stand up and try to fetch the ice herself? Otherwise, she would never get relief for the wounded man!

But what if Jochaan, lying unprotected on the slanting rock at the entrance, rolled out of the cave while she was gone?

"Bring me a piece of ice!" she screamed into the ear of the dull-witted slave, desperate.

An insane, vacant grin bared his teeth at her. He had heard the words but not understood them; his mind, broken by terror, could grasp no meaning any longer.

"Send our boys to the spring, Zista, and have them fetch me water," Jochaan pleaded, lifting his crippled hand to caress the child. "That cannot be so difficult, wife—it is only a small favor, which the children will gladly do. Afterwards they may go on playing, the little ones. Just one drink of water for their father—is that too much to ask?"

"I have only warm blood, Jochaan," Zista whispered into his ear, though she knew he would not understand. "Will you drink my blood, Jochaan?"

Only a distant, indistinct murmur reached the scholar's ruined ear, yet he thought he had understood and nodded faintly, his burning head aching with pain.

Then the child drew her sharp stone knife from her hip cloth, carefully pulled it from its leather sheath, and stabbed her arm.

But in that very instant, the cave gave a violent jolt downward—the blade plunged deep into her soft flesh, and a bright stream of blood burst forth like a crimson spring, flowing over Jochaan's pale face.

Quickly the child pressed the gushing wound to the mouth of the beloved man and let him drink.

And Jochaan drank like one dying of thirst—wildly, greedily—drank the blood of his little queen until he was sated and content, sinking back peacefully and resting his weary, furrowed face upon her breast like a satisfied child.

Zista smiled down joyfully upon his relaxed features.

"Why did I never think of this simple thing before?" she thought, with a gentle laugh in her heart. "I still have enough blood to let the man I love drink! And he didn't drink so very much. Too bad the blood keeps flowing—but it will stop soon, that's nothing. I only cut a little too deep. Later, I'll open it again when he wakes and wants to drink. See, Jochaan, now your boys have brought you water from the spring and can keep playing in our garden. And I'll take good care of Araton's dove when it comes from the Northland and brings you word of how things stand up there on the white rock, in your fortresses—you, builder of the new Earth, my dear, good king and husband!"

Wearily the fine head of the royal sister sank against Jochaan's cheek.

A faint, distant murmur drifted through the howling of the world's end—but the howling grew weaker, muffled, and the soft rushing in her ears became clearer, sounding like gentle music and bright, ringing laughter of children.

"Now I too shall sleep a little, my Jochaan," thought Zista, though her thoughts no longer obeyed her, growing tangled and tired.

"I'll lie down beneath the trees in the sun while you sleep, so that I'll be rested when you awaken and want to drink again. I never knew how beautiful it is to be your queen, the mother of your children. You see, everything has turned out well after all—we thought it would always stay cruel! Your eyes too will see again, Jochaan; we must only wait a little, have patience. When we awaken, all things will be better—so much better."

More quietly still, the warm red blood of the little royal sister flowed over Jochaan's chest; softly came the breaths of the young royal pair of the new Earth. Far away, the blessed laughter of children echoed beneath the new, sun-filled spring sky—and they both smiled, for it sounded merry and full of life, carefree and joyful, like children laughing for no reason, simply because life is beautiful and filled with happiness.

"Is that not a dove fluttering there, Jochaan?" Zista asked in her dream. "Sit here, little messenger of Prince Araton. Look, Jochaan! She carries a letter on her red foot — a fine, smooth strip of leather! Where have I seen such a leather strip before? Now you must read it, you clever builder of the new Earth, for your foolish wife still has to learn. Don't laugh at me, Jochaan, or I'll be cross! I truly mean to learn! Do you think I'm one of those lazy women who lets you have your way in everything? Araton could sing you quite a song about your queen's stubborn head — for I ran away from him to come to you. It was surely wrong of me to run away, but he said he would see to it that it was no sin! Still, wrong it was — I'm clever enough to know that — yet it shall be my last wrongdoing, Jochaan. I'll never run away from you, that's certain! And even if I were ever angry with you, I'd stay — because of the children — for you know nothing about raising children. They mustn't notice when the king quarrels with

the queen. Do you remember when the glassy sea broke and fell upon the Earth? Do you remember how the cave nearly stood on its head? How long ago that was — and no one believes it anymore. And when we tell it to our boys, they look at us in wonder. I almost think, Jochaan, it was all a foolish, terrible dream... Yes, yes, the Earth is a sphere — like my head, Jochaan — only a little larger, but not much harder... I won't contradict you... You're a silly man for having thrown away that beautiful red cork. Now no one will ever believe that it swam around the world! Since I've been your wife, I've learned that scholars like you are, in truth, rather foolish. But I shall take good care never to tell anyone so — a clever woman keeps such things to herself. I share in your glory and tell everyone that I spend an hour each day on my knees before you, in reverence and silent adoration — though in truth, it was often otherwise. Eh? Really, a learned man like you ought to remain unmarried; then his fame stays untarnished. You see, a wife notices too much! But we can't change that now. Come with me to the blue river that rushes down from the holy mountain and flows into the plain like a stream of clear, shining jewels... Come with me into the cool forests by the shore... Do you remember when you were so thirsty... that you had to drink my blood, because I had nothing else to give? Strange, how long ago that was... Now we drink clear, cold water and wine grown on the mountain slopes... You say my blood tasted far better than the finest wine on Earth? So now the old king, with his gray hair, still grows tender toward his faded wife! Jochaan, isn't it beautiful — when one knows one's husband so well that…"

Silent and happy, the dream faded into the mist of nothingness. The small dark head of the king's sister sank lower onto her beloved, and her gentle breathing ceased.

Slowly, the red blood still trickled in a hesitant little stream from her brown arm—then the spring dried up.

Zista had fallen asleep without knowing she would never wake again. Yet her back still rose and fell ever so slightly beneath the faint breaths of the mortally wounded man. Her protective arms held his shattered head tightly, and her small feet braced stiffly against the narrow crevice of the cave entrance.

Outside, burning stars from the body of the glassy sea crashed into the quaking earth; dreadfully the celestial projectiles howled over the crags of the holy mountain toward the east. Near and far, the fire-mountains blazed blood-red amid glowing clouds of shattered metal. But the young queen of the new Earth slept, and on her inclined, pale face a gentle smile was frozen.

In fevered delirium, Jochaan spoke to his dead companion whenever fleeting clarity returned to him, yet his pleas for water went unanswered. His crippled hand groped across her cold, rigid cheek and her chill arms; no movement told the sick man that his queen still heard him. Groaning, the builder

stirred and tried to lift his head from the cooling lap of his beloved. But the small woman held him fast and unyielding, her arms encircling his broad chest like taut, icy bonds.

His lips murmured incoherent words into the dead, flat ear that bent over his mouth, just as it had through many long, endless days. Then Jochaan grew still again and, in his fevered dreams, forgot the sudden dread that Zista lay so motionless above him, her back bowed, her skin so eerily cold—the skin that once had lain warm against his broken head.

Endlessly flowed the time that was no time, in dreadful darkness and suffocating, sluggish crawl. The breath of the man from the holy mountain grew quieter still; only a faint rattling came from his open mouth. Yet Jochaan did not know that he too was to be harvested—just as Zista had been harvested by the sickle of the cruel glassy sea. For the blow of Galmon's heavy battle-axe was the fault of the breaking moon, and the wound too deep in Zista's arm was the fault of the quakes that the falling moon had hurled in boundless tremors across the dying Earth.

Bright, enticing visions of Earth's happy age — of an eternal spring — drifted through the soul of the broken man, images he had often seen in spirit and which now were about to become reality, though he was not permitted to see them with his eyes.

He stood at an altar with Zista and the children she had borne him, with the men and women of the rescued race of the old Earth that had perished, and prayed with them to the Great Spirit — the only divinity he had ever acknowledged — whose harsh hand he had felt behind the terrible events of the Flood, though he knew not the law that destroys only to create anew.

Again, hail of ice clattered down from black clouds, yet the violent trembling of the Earth grew gentler. More rarely did the air howl with falling mountains and stones.

The weary heap of poor human creatures lifted their matted, bruised heads in disbelief; they stared toward the narrow rock cleft of the entrance, and it seemed that, now and then, a mild and tender brightness shone into the cave — not the dreadful light of burning mountains.

Cautiously, a few dared to move, remembering that the devilish thirst still burned in their entrails, and pushed toward Jochaan's storerooms to fetch ice. Nephat too noticed the change. With trembling hands, he helped Queen Aramut down from the strange, hanging hearth and climbed himself over the steep stone wall onto the new ground — stiff, bruised, his eyes swollen, lips foaming with blood.

"Where is Jochaan?" asked the Queen — her eternal question.

The priest of the holy mountain did not understand, only stared at her in fear.

"Here at the entrance lies the builder, with Zista, the king's sister," said one of the slaves who had understood her.

Swaying and stumbling, Aramut made her way to the exit. She grasped Zista by the shoulder to lift her — and found the girl's back rigid.

Slaves helped the Queen free the scholar from the embrace of the dead maiden and laid the lifeless, contorted body of the beautiful young royal sister upon a panther skin. Willingly, the people stepped aside.

The crippled arms of the scholar groped into the air, searching for his friend.

"Zista — Zista!" he murmured in terror. "Why are you going away? Don't leave me alone — I still have so much to tell you." Then Aramut saw that the King's builder was blind, and that the days of his rich life, full of toil and suffering, were soon to end. Silently, with a torn, sorrowful smile, she sat down in the place of the little royal sister and bent over the narrow mouth of the dying man. She heard words of love with bitter pain — words not meant for her, but for the Queen of the new Earth, the beloved who was no more.

You shall not know it, thought the queen, and she listened to Jochaan's faltering words. She heard him speak of his and Zista's children, of the new Earth and the new Heaven, the new kingdom of the slave, and faintly she caught the whispered phrases that wavered around his thoughts of earthly happiness.

"Think of Araton's dove," he said again and again. This thought seemed to move him most deeply.

The queen placed small pieces of ice between the fevered man's lips. A smile appeared upon Jochaan's shattered features.

"Your blood, dear little woman, tasted better," he murmured with a faint breath of gentle humor.

Motherly, Aramut wrapped her arms around the dying man she had loved since first she knew him. Quietly and peacefully, his battered head rested upon her breast. But Jochaan believed it was Zista beside him and laughed softly, contentedly.

"Behold, the dwelling of the Great Spirit among men!" he said clearly, and his crippled arms reached out toward the distance, toward the brightening dawn of the new heaven. "He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and He Himself, God with them, shall be their God; and He shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and death shall be no more, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain; for the former things have passed away. He shall give unto the thirsty from the fountain of living waters, and whoever overcomes shall inherit all these things."

Jochaan lay still, outstretched in the arms of Queen Aramut, and spoke no more. Slowly the hours crept on; yet still lived the builder of the new Earth.

When, for the first time, the sun of the new age cast a faint ray into the mouth of the cave — when hope surged up like an overwhelming tide of joy — Jochaan died. The pale sunbeam had fallen upon his bloodied brow, and he felt its warmth. A smile rested on the sunken, aged face — the smile of a victor. Unseen, the Great Spirit came to Jochaan, who had been His friend from the beginning — for the very reason that He had let him suffer — and took his soul in both hands. He lifted it up into the light of the coming day like a rare and precious pearl.

"Behold, Jochaan, this is your Earth," He said. "Gladly would I keep you now, proud builder, for you have been rich as none upon my ancient star. You have thwarted my design, for through your own strength you became more than even I foresaw. Therefore I owe a debt to the Earth, and gladly will I repay it. I will let you flow over the new clay of the Earth as a precious seed for those who shall come after you. I never believed that a man could compel my reverence — yet you have done so, and I must confess it. I set you free, Jochaan, for neither you nor your kind can I hold, since you are the restlessness and longing of the Earth itself. Even I can give her nothing higher."

With these words, the Great Spirit let the soul of Jochaan flow forth — and smiled, seeing how eagerly it spread to embrace the whole Earth. But that was not enough; it rose like a colored arc from the distant mists into the heavens, as the sun sank low in the west and night began to fall.

"He reaches into the vastness of my realm!" said the Great Spirit, nodding with kind humor. "I love the insatiable. When I return, you shall be greater still."

Then He set His foot upon the ring of Saturn and stepped beyond Sirius, into the immensities only He knew — for only He could think in the terms of eternity, and time itself had no being for Him.

End.

Edmund Kiß

Afterword by Hans Wolfgang Behm

That more underlies the preceding novel than the workings of free imagination alone will surely not have escaped the attentive reader. It is a fortunate coincidence that a literary creator such as Edmund Kiss also enjoys the highest reputation as a research explorer in glacial-cosmogenic matters, having, for example, traveled through the South American Andes region. If I further add that Glacial Cosmogony and the World Ice Theory (Welteislehre)[1] are equivalent concepts, and that behind this foreign term lies a worldview of which nearly everyone has at least heard in passing, I may well expect particular interest in the brief remarks that follow here.

That the prophecy of the novel's hero, Jochaan, connects to that of the New Testament's "Revelation of John" (Apocalypse), is no mere coincidence, but rather rooted in the interpretation of ancient, inherited texts and myths in the sense of the World Ice Theory. For indeed, the creator of this doctrine, the engineer Hanns Hörbiger[2] (who died in 1931 in Mauer near Vienna), saw precisely in the Apocalypse the weaving together of the most ancient knowledge of cosmos and earth—knowledge which, though often clothed in symbolic veils and less transparent expression, nonetheless unmistakably reveals the tremendous forces to which mankind in very ancient days had already been exposed. Events such as must once have actually occurred on Earth within the framework of scientific–glacial–cosmogonic understanding can, in other words, also easily be discerned in the records of the apocalyptic writer. This discovery, however, is rightly to be understood as a subsequent confirmation of long-established World Ice perspectives — and not the other way around.

No wonder, then, that this novel incorporates passages taken almost verbatim from the Apocalypse, and that scenes of natural events of catastrophic violence and extraordinary severity for all living things on Earth are depicted. For it is a fundamental requirement of the World Ice Theory to wrench the development of the Earth and its life away from the commonly held notion of a steady and gradual geological uniformity, and instead to affirm the reality of periodically recurring epochs of great cataclysms upon the Earth. The ultimate cause of these upheavals is to be sought in cosmic processes, which in turn appear most intimately linked with the entire history of becoming of our solar system.

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[1] Cf. Behm, Welteis und Weltentwicklung, which provides in 48 pages a concise overview of the entire World Ice Theory. (At present in its third edition. V. Hase & Koehler, Verlag, Leipzig.)
[2] Cf. Behm, Hörbiger, ein Schicksal. This approximately 350-page work, equipped with 16 illustration plates, represents the first attempt at a biography of the creator of the World Ice Theory. (V. Hase & Koehler, Verlag, Leipzig.)

To understand this, we must first grow accustomed to the outlook that the number of planets once orbiting our Sun was greater, and that beyond the Earth (toward the orbit of Mars) other planets also moved. Each of these planets eventually, through continuous orbital contraction, came dangerously close to the Earth's path. This is due to the fact that space is not to be regarded as completely empty, but rather as offering resistance to every celestial body that moves through it. Once such a smaller planet entered the Earth's gravitational field, its existence as a wandering star was at an end: it was compelled no longer to circle the Sun as a planet, but to revolve around the Earth as a moon — ever drawing nearer — until it finally became attached to it.

This process of attachment marks the all-powerful final act of a lunar tragedy; it is the true cause of a deluge upon Earth and brings about a period during which the Earth possesses no moon — in other words, an epoch of moonless time.

Only under the influence of a moon orbiting and continually approaching it does the Earth undergo its great geological catastrophes. The somewhat smaller predecessor of our present Moon exerted, at first, an influence upon the Earth quite similar to that of the Moon we know today. At a distance of about sixty Earth-radii, a moon sets in motion around the globe that immense pulsation of the seas which we call tide and ebb. Because of the mobility of its particles, the Earth's watery envelope responds far more readily than the solid crust to the force acting upon it. But as a moon slowly approaches the Earth, and its orbital period shortens, these tidal forces increase to enormous intensity, exerting their influence not only upon the oceans but also upon the continents — and not least upon the atmospheric envelope.

The waters of the Earth are drawn toward the equator into a girdling flood, leaving the polar and higher latitudes entirely desiccated. When, finally, the moon — now only a few Earth-radii away — circles the planet within the span of a single day, the Earth's moist element stands heaped in two colossal tidal bulges: one anchored over Africa, the other above the Pacific Ocean. Only within two narrow tropical zones between these twin flood-mountains does a climate favorable to life prevail, while across all other regions of the Earth, due to the moon-induced vacuum and rarefaction of the air, reigns a glacial age.

And the peculiar inclination of the Earth's axis relative to the plane of the lunar orbit causes vast volumes of water from these twin flood-mountains to be hurled northward and southward over the planet's surface each day — so prodigious that mountain ranges of the height of the Caucasus are easily overrun. The Earth experiences a great mountain-building epoch. The far-swinging surges of the flood scour the ocean floors, snap forests as though they were reeds, carry away the debris, and deposit it in stratified layers across the ebb

zones. Accompanying this hellish dance of the flood powers, here and there, the fiery throats of volcanoes belch forth.

After the conclusion of this mountain-forming epoch, as the Moon continues to approach and its orbital period becomes shorter than the Earth's rotation, the previously anchored tidal bulges begin once again to wander — now in the opposite direction. The end result is a second girdling flood encircling the equator. The atmosphere, thickened by incessant rain, is in wild turmoil: it is never truly day, nor — in the face of the now immense and dazzlingly radiant lunar disc — ever truly night. Several times a day, the latitudes of Central Europe experience total solar eclipses, and several times likewise total lunar eclipses.

Soon comes the great final act — the Moon dissolves and breaks apart. According to the World Ice Theory, every moon possesses, over its solid core, a massive shell of ice; thus, at first, a comet-like swarm of ice fragments streams toward the Earth. Each fragment forms a hail-cloud spiraling down through the atmosphere. Even glacier-sized blocks of lunar ice plunge into the air envelope. Cloudbursts and hailstorms of inconceivable fury, cosmic tempests and electrical discharges of the greatest magnitude assail the Earth. The pure lunar crust-ice descending upon the planet becomes further mixed with the sludgy matter of the Moon's core. Finally, what remains of that core itself shatters, bursts apart, and bombards the Earth with a storm of stone and metallic slag.

Now that no lunar force acts upon the Earth, the strain that had distorted the planet's body — making it, so to speak, egg-shaped, its rocky crust drawn into a bulging equatorial ridge, and its oceans heaped into an immense belt of water around the equator — comes to an end.

The Earth returns to its spherical form. There is groaning, hissing, rumbling, and fearful cracking across the world. Crustal subsidences, faultings, and fractures are triggered. The ocean waters are frequently given access to the hostile inner heat of the planet. Corresponding magma floods surge forth like fiery serpents across vast regions. But the breaking of the equatorial water reservoir's confinement also occurs: the long-restrained gates burst open, and a deluge erupts. Two colossal ring-flood waves sweep north and south from the tropics toward the higher latitudes, ebbing and surging back again in repeated oscillations. They flow far toward the poles as well, for the broad current, the farther north and south it moves, must pour over ever-narrower spherical caps.

The Earth still lies under the aftershocks of a Moon-ice age, yet at last it finds rest and enters a period of moonless time, which will only end when a new Earth-moon is once again captured. Thus, many times before, Moon-ice ages and moonless ages have alternated upon the Earth — the former accompanied by great catastrophes, the latter by a kind of eternal spring. What

all this has meant for life I have set down in two corresponding volumes, in which I have also described in detail the course of a Moon-ice age.[3]

The setting of the present novel is the highlands of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) at the time of the global catastrophe caused by the predecessor of our present Moon — the so-called Kaino-Moon. By this point, that earlier Moon had already approached the Earth dangerously closely, standing on the brink of its disintegration and collapse — which finally occurs, unleashing the Deluge and explaining Araton's drifting voyage.

We have sufficient reason to assume that immediately before the outbreak of this last terrestrial flood, certain tropical highland regions still rose above the encircling equatorial girdle-flood. Elevations similar to the Abyssinian highlands likely protruded as tropical, habitable refuges for humankind above the waters. Likewise, the massive western and eastern Cordilleras of South America, with the plateau between them, would have extended northward from the south (and perhaps the Mexican high plateau from the north), forming habitable peninsulas projecting from the frozen hinterlands into the tropical oceanic belt. In contrast, at that time the Isthmus of Panama, the entirety of present-day Brazil, the lowlands of Bolivia and Ecuador, as well as all of Central Africa, were deeply submerged beneath the waters. Ice-free, however, was the highland region of today's Lake Titicaca — the former realm of Tihuanaku — whose mysteries likewise become comprehensible only through the perspectives of the World Ice Theory.

It was there that Kiss himself stayed, and he has his novel's hero, Jochaan, travel from Tihuanaku to Abyssinia. It is assumed that the girdling equatorial flood did not flow exactly parallel to the equator, but crossed it at a sharp angle, with alternating current directions. The starting point of Jochaan's voyage may have been the coast of the Tihuanaku realm, around ten degrees south latitude; his landing, upon the Abyssinian islands, around ten degrees north latitude. Granting the novel some poetic license — that such a voyage could be made in a dugout canoe, and even successfully — the crossing time itself would have been only a few days, at an approximate core-current speed of 30 nautical miles per hour, or about 10 in the marginal flows. Glacial-cosmogonic insight makes such a velocity plausible.

Jochaan's attempt, as described in the story, to determine the shape of the Earth by entrusting cork pieces to the continuous ring-flood cannot be dismissed as entirely hopeless, since the return of one or another cork from the western side lies within the realm of possibility.

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[3] Behm, Von Sintflut zu Sintflut ("From Deluge to Deluge"). 365 pages, with 85 illustrations in the text, 4 color and 16 monochrome plates, and 3 tables. (V. Hase & Koehler, Verlag, Leipzig.)

Behm, Schöpfung des Menschen. Revolution um Charles Darwin und sein Erbe ("The Creation of Man: Revolution Concerning Charles Darwin and His Legacy"). 248 pages and 54 illustrations. (V. Hase & Koehler, Verlag, Leipzig.)

To fix the setting more precisely: the girdle-flood extended about twenty degrees north and south of the equator. Rising from it, between fifteen and eighteen degrees north latitude, stood the islands of the Abyssinians — the present-day mountain peaks (around Mount Ras Dashan, roughly 4,620 meters high). Here, within the novel's framework, lie Mount Peri, the Holy Mountain, and the city of Tulma. The climate is tropical, with intense summer rainfall lashing the region. All southern mountainous portions of present-day Abyssinia are to be regarded as submerged beneath the waters, as is Mount Kenya, just below the equator.

To the north, beyond the twentieth parallel, semi-glaciated mainland bordered the girdle-flood, cut by numerous sea-arms and bays which made the seafaring of the Abyssinians, mentioned in the novel, possible. This "Nordland" of the Abyssinian realm, with its temperate to cold climate and a distinct alternation of summer and winter, reached to about the twenty-third degree north latitude — near the Tropic of Cancer. There stood Jochaan's fortresses upon the "white stone" — that is, the inland ice, which according to the insights of the World Ice Theory is assumed to have been about two kilometers thick.

Further north, between the twenty-third and thirtieth parallels, lay the land of the nomads — the "Nordmänner" — whose territory permitted its inhabitants only the barest existence. At around thirty degrees north, it bordered the zones of permanent glaciation, as required by the lunar-cataclysmic framework of the World Ice Theory. Driven by cold and hunger, tribes of these nomads repeatedly attempted to push southward into warmer lands — that is, into the territories of the Abyssinian Empire. As the novel recounts, such incursions occasionally succeeded; one of Araton's ancestors had been the leader of an earlier Nordmann tribe whose invasion had met with success.

However, to protect themselves from overpopulation and to maintain their hold amid limited living space and scarce food supplies, the rulers of the Abyssinian Empire were repeatedly forced into defensive campaigns. Thus, when the novel speaks of "Nordland expeditions," it must not be overlooked that these refer to regions still south of the thirtieth parallel north — otherwise, geographical orientation would lead to entirely false conceptions. What we today call northern regions lay then buried deep beneath kilometer-thick ice sheets, forbidding all living existence.

With undeniable skill, the author has sought to shape all the natural events underlying the novel as closely as possible to the principles demanded by the World Ice Theory. The attempt must be called successful, and even the lay reader is enabled to form an impression of the immense tribulations to which humankind — surely already many millions of years ago — was exposed.

If we single out certain distinctive features of the narrative which might sound utopian, these too gain plausibility once considered from the standpoint of Hörbiger's doctrine of Earthly Catastrophes. The flood waves described, for example, in the Zista chapter become perfectly comprehensible when one realizes that, at the end of a lunar ice age, it must often have occurred that masses of water came into contact with molten magma. We can still observe similar, though smaller-scale, events in the Earth's current processes. Flood waves such as those described in the chapters Of the Sickle or Of the White Stone were likewise nothing extraordinary for that epoch; they result particularly from the increasing eccentricity of the orbit of the Tertiary Moon, which, shortly before its disintegration, must have produced an all-around amplification of tidal forces on Earth.

When the novel speaks of Araton's ride northward accompanied by rapidly increasing cold and air-thinning, this corresponds to the suction of air masses caused by the Tertiary Moon as it approached to within only a few Earth-radii. As a result of the tidal effect upon the Earth's atmosphere, the upper air boundary must have plunged sharply from the equatorial bulge toward the north and south. The spiral path of the moon's approach would have become exceedingly steep just before its fall, explaining the abnormal cold and thinning of the air during the final year of the northern campaign — an effect of the last intensified pull of the moon's tides.

That during a moon's collapse especially the eastern faces of high mountains served as shelters against heavy flat-trajectory bombardment is evident from the world-ice–derived analysis of the trajectories of lunar fragments and their fall paths. Thus, on eastern slopes, life — and with it, humankind — could most easily maintain itself. To be protected at all from descending moon debris, man had to seek natural caves or construct for himself artificial shelters that were, in effect, "bombproof."

Even the rescue of Araton's group upon a kilometer-thick ice floe drifting at more than express-train speed is nothing unusual. Reports from our own polar explorers repeatedly show that they lived for months upon drifting floes. The ice floe of Araton's people would naturally have been of vastly greater dimensions than the icebergs of today's oceans. Shelters dug into such ice would have protected them from the nearly horizontal "flat fire" of falling moon fragments, whose vertical impact force must have been minimal. The described journey of such a floe halfway around the northern hemisphere of the Earth is equally conceivable — indeed probable — and it is even likely that herds of mammoths, buried in ice, drifted with it. Later, the preserved carcasses of these ice-entombed beasts may well have provided sustenance for the few human survivors of the catastrophe.

Of course, all the natural events touched upon in the novel did not unfold within the span of a human lifetime. The happenings had necessarily to

be compressed, and the factor of time entirely eliminated, for the sake of the narrative's human figures. Yet, in order to make at least some portion of the World Ice Theory's conceptual world accessible to broader circles in simplified form, this artistic method had to be chosen.

It now remains only to show, through a few striking examples, how from that most enigmatic of texts — the Revelation of John — the sequence of a lunar-caused catastrophic age on Earth, culminating in a gigantic deluge, can plainly be read. Kiss, as already mentioned, has likewise made use of this very perspective for his novel.

As an undoubtedly gifted thinker and researcher, the author of the Apocalypse drew from corresponding ancient sources of tradition and painted, from the past, a prophecy of the future. This, incidentally, may be of significance for the future destiny of our own Earth, since our present Moon too will one day join itself to the Earth.

He speaks of the "Glassy Sea" and the "White Stone," and the interpretation is by no means forced — it is natural to recognize in these first the frozen Tertiary Moon and second the inland ice of the Earth. Indeed, the Greek word kristallos originally meant ice — a concept only later applied to artificial crystal or glass. Thus, when John speaks of a "Glassy Sea like crystal," this clearly refers (and further details confirm this) to the presence of a bright, ice-covered Moon reflecting the sunlight intensely.

Without doubt, the apocalyptist often spoke in veiled riddles, to lend a certain pathos to his imagery of renewal and judgment. Moreover, in his text, the order of the visions — each grounded in real natural phenomena — appears at times disturbed or rearranged.

We find ourselves in the time immediately before the Deluge—that is, prior to the collapse of the Tertiary Moon.

At that time, the humans of the tropics could perceive this moon only as a crescent, though—because of its close proximity to Earth—it appeared of colossal size. A view of it as a full moon was impossible, since the Earth's shadow, measuring 90 degrees in diameter, and the Moon's orbit lying closely along the equatorial plane, prevented it.

Thus, it is entirely consistent that the Book of Revelation speaks of a great, sharp sickle or scythe:

"Thrust in thy sickle, and reap; for the time is come for thee to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." (Revelation 14:15)

or

"Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her grapes are fully ripe." (Revelation 14:18)

When it is written (Revelation 8:12):

"And the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise," this image of the fourth trumpeting angel likely conceals a description of that same immediately pre-diluvial age—a time when, due to the moon's furious and ever-quickening orbit around the Earth, multiple solar and lunar eclipses occurred daily.

"And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent: and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great." (Revelation 16:21)

This marks the beginning of the moon's disintegration: the first ice fragments from the lunar crust spiral tangentially into the Earth's atmosphere. The combined effect of countless hailstorms sweeping west to east around the tropical belt is at times tremendous.

Moreover, the impact velocity of some of these ice blocks may have remained below eight kilometers per second. For that reason, the shattering of the ice would not have reduced it to grains as fine as those of ordinary hail today—thus making it entirely plausible that centner-sized ice masses (weighing roughly 50 kilograms or more) reached the Earth's surface. Hence the "plague" of weeks-long, unrelenting hailstorms as reported.

"And behold," (Revelation 6:12–16) "there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the moon became as blood, and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb!"

These words, in the context of the World Ice Theory, would describe the disintegration of the Moon: the "stars falling to earth" correspond to the fragments of lunar ice raining down; the blackening of the sun represents the general darkening of the atmosphere; the great earthquake reflects the massive tremors that, during the moon's breakup, would have shaken especially the equatorial regions of the Earth.

"And the angel took the censer" (Revelation 8:7–11) "and filled it with fire from the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake… And there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth; and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up… And as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and the third part of the sea became blood; and the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships were destroyed… And there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter."

What are we to read in this? Clearly, the event described is that of the moon-ice hail gradually turning into a mud-hail, and finally into a hail of iron mountains. The atmosphere, already intensely heated, sets trees aflame. The "great mountain burning with fire" and the "star burning like a torch" both refer to larger fragments of the moon's molten core, heated by friction to incandescence as they plunged earthward. The iron oxide and metallic residue produced by these impacts must have dyed shallow coastal waters red—as if turned to blood. It follows without question that aquatic life perished in great masses.

Furthermore, the descending mud carried sodium compounds, alkalis, salts, sulfates, and bases, making rivers and springs undrinkable and poisonous, that is—bitter.

"And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood." (Revelation 16:3–4)

Here the text speaks even more plainly of the general poisoning of the waters by lunar debris.

"And the fourth angel" (Revelation 16:8–9, 11) "poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat… and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores."

As the moon's mass diminished and the Earth's crust—strained and distorted by tidal forces—began to rebound toward its original form, subterranean gases were released. This led to a gradual increase in air pressure and daytime temperatures. In addition, hot gas eruptions occurred through

seismic ruptures in the Earth's interior. The "burning heat" of the sun thus mirrored both this atmospheric densification and these infernal exhalations.

At other points in Revelation (9:17–18; 18:17; 20:9) there are further allusions to volcanic paroxysms, earthquakes, and similar upheavals. Nor does it surprise that the text speaks of "painful sores" upon mankind—an understandable affliction given the poisonous air, radiation, and thermal effects of such cataclysmic events. Kiss, as we recall, wove this very phenomenon into his novel.

"And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw" (Revelation 9:1–2) "a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit."

In Hörbiger's interpretation, this may well depict the formation of a new volcano—perhaps even a submarine one—since the "smoking pit of the abyss" is mentioned. Such events could have occurred hundreds of times during the brief period of the moon's dissolution, possibly triggered by the impact of massive slag-fragments from the moon's core striking the Earth.

When we read later in Revelation 10:5–6 that "there should be time no longer," this can only mean that humankind of the immediately pre-diluvial age had lost all measure of time. The alternation of day and night, summer and winter—the very rhythm of time—had vanished. All was in turmoil, and the swiftly approaching, rapidly disintegrating moon had extinguished every sense of duration.

Finally, it is noteworthy that after depicting all the horror and misery—interpretable as a cosmic judgment—the apocalyptist speaks of a new heaven and a new earth:

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and the sea is no more." (Revelation 21:1)

Thus ends the chronicle of catastrophe — the world destroyed and remade through the fall of the Moon.

This is, according to the conclusions of the World Ice Theory, entirely logical. As has been emphasized, the author of the Apocalypse had primarily tropical traditions at his disposal. All of these speak of the immense calamities that befell the scattered remnants of humankind who had sought refuge in tropical highlands during the Moon's collapse. These survivors quite literally sat in the sea, surrounded on all sides by the roaring equatorial flood.

But this encircling flood came to an end the moment the Moon vanished — that is, when its mass was absorbed by the Earth. The equatorial flood receded as the Deluge, and to the tropical peoples it appeared as though the sea surrounding them had withdrawn. The equatorial regions, once more exposed, were drained of water; lands that had previously been washed by the waves now rose above the surface. Hence, the Deluge itself plays little role in John's vision — his tropical sources clearly focused on the equatorial flood, the great drama of the Moon's downfall occurring chiefly along the equator.

That John speaks of a sea that is no more confirms that he drew upon tropical tradition. The equatorial sea had indeed vanished, even though, due to the Moon's collapse, the total volume of Earth's water had increased substantially within a few weeks. A completely new distribution of the waters had taken place. In many respects, a new Earth had truly been born: not only had the coastlines of the pre-diluvial world been utterly transformed, but the new lands themselves were covered with a thick layer of clay and loess — debris from the shattered lunar core.

After the horrors of the Moon-cataclysm — the vast glaciations spreading from north and south, the countless daily perils to man and beast — this transformation of the Earth must have felt like a deliverance, even though the aftershocks of those dreadful times would still be felt for millennia. It was indeed a "new Earth," blessed not only in the tropics but across the temperate zones as well, where now an eternal springtime seemed to reign. The change of seasons had almost vanished, a result of the altered tilt of the Earth's axis relative to the ecliptic.

The former heaven had likewise passed away, as John correctly observes — for the Earth, for a time, possessed no moon. It had entered a moonless era, a geologically tranquil interval — the last such period before our own age. Since then, the Earth has once again captured a Moon, only a few millennia ago, binding it to her and forcing it to relinquish its independent existence as a planet. Our present Moon — the "Glassy Sea" now shining in the heavens — will one day repeat, on a greater scale, what its predecessor, the Glassy Sea of John, once brought upon the Earth in fate and terror. But that time still lies far ahead.

For now, let us rather study the runes of the past, which none has ever sought to decipher with greater insight than the very creator of the World Ice Theory, to whom the author of this work likewise owes his material.

June 1930

A popular and spirited Introduction to Hörbiger's World Ice Theory by the author of this novel, Edmund Kiss, may be especially recommended here.

Equipped with 13 illustrations, the 116-page volume, handsomely bound in decorative cardboard, costs only 2 RM. (V. Hase & Koehler, Leipzig.)

Another work by Edmund Kiss, “The Cosmic Causes of the Migrations of Peoples”, deals with the southward movement of entire races from the far north. (Also published by the same house; stiff cardboard binding, 2 RM.)

THE LAST QUEEN OF ATLANTIS

A novel from around 12,000 B.C.

by Edmund Kiß

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Edmund Kiß

FOREWORD

On the high plains of Bolivia lies an ancient buried city, known today as Tihuanaku, but in the legends of some native peoples of the Americas called Aztlan. From earth filled with bones rise immense structures toward the pure heavens, and the fortress Akapana ascends with its high, buried terraces into the clouds.

When the author stood in Aztlan before the unfinished work of art depicting the head of a scholar — with Nordic features, a high forehead, and narrow lips — a sculpture whose gray clay the spade had freed from the solar observatory Kalasasaya, it seemed as though the mysterious stone eyes of the image were pointing upward. For in the western sky, the first faint stars of the cosmos were beginning to glow.

Soon the radiant arch of the Milky Way shimmered across the velvet depths above. Softly, the stars dripped down upon Aztlan, the buried city on the Andean highlands —dripped upon Akapana, the towering fortress, trickled in silent light upon Kalasasaya, the buried observatory of the star-wise, and upon the City of the Dead, Puma Punku, the water gate of the great lake.

Across the royal Cordillera streamed a current of silver light, as if tall white figures were riding eastward.

Then the story of Godda Apacheta fell from the Book of the Heavenly Road down to Earth. Star after star released its secret into the still, cold night, whispering of the soul of Apacheta, the Star-Sage of Aztlan. What he once inscribed, in bitter anguish, into the shining arch of heaven, trickled downward — at first hesitantly, then swiftly — in the luminous river of stars. They were too full of Apacheta's mystery.

And silently too passed Heldung-Atlanta, the fate of the Realm of Atlantis, across the path of the ecliptic — the new star of the sage, whom we today call the Moon.

Thus came the story of the noble scholar of Aztlan to Earth. Nothing has been added, and nothing taken away. What fell from the Bridge of the Stars in shining streams is given to you — Nordic women and men, who, like him, thrust the lance of your souls toward the lofty peaks.

THE NEW STAR

"How can you sleep on the grass, Godda Apacheta? And in the rain, no less?" said Atlanta. She must have spotted me from Framer's Palace and come down to find me.

Well, the rain hadn't been so bad — already the clear sky of the highlands between the Andes was blue again, and the delicate cloud that had sprayed me wet was drifting eastward.

"How you look!" Atlanta continued reproachfully, her bright eyes examining my black robe, upon which the raindrops shimmered and challenged the luster of the pearls on my breastplate. "The watchman has just announced the arrival of Acora's ships. He will be here soon — and you…?"

"A soaked scholar in the Hall of Akapana is an impossible sight," I admitted, contrite and very solemn — though Atlanta could still hear the mischief in my tone.

"Only if others see you besides me," she replied with a laugh. It sounded both sweet and treacherous — enticing, like the stars from which those earth-heavy, intoxicating flowers are born, that laugh with glimmering eyes.

"How you look at me, Godda Apacheta."

When Atlanta spoke my name again, I finally woke completely — though I had thought I was already awake.

Her pale, slender face shone down toward me, as I lay upon the grassy terrace behind the great water basin, high atop the fortress plateau of Akapana, beneath the wide fronds of the ferns.

Far to the east the low cloud drifted away.

"Did I look at you, Atlanta?" I asked, confused, and stood up—for though it is well for a knight to lie at the feet of his beloved, it is ill indeed if he does so while asleep.

Now, however, I stood beside her—awake, and heavy with earth, as she was. And I could say nothing; I only looked at her again— lover and artist at once. I drank in her tall, bright form with my eyes.

Yet I did not truly look at her; rather I lay spellbound in the chains of her blue-starred eyes, beneath her fine narrow brow crowned with a golden circlet, and knew only an unspeakable joy—to drink in, with my eyes alone, this

child of the northern land, this masterpiece of a pure, ancient race, the rulers of the earth.

But Atlanta shook her head, though she felt how carried away I was by her presence—and although a delicate flush rose upon her cheeks in reply.

Then her noble lips opened into a smile—both enticing and defensive—and her starlit eyes indicated, almost imperceptibly, a group of well-dressed men who had gathered by the stairway leading up to the fortress on the north side, beneath heavy arcades of green lava stone, as if waiting for an eminent guest.

The sun, standing in the west and casting its rays obliquely across the vast courtyard—so that in the gentle ripples of the artificial lake the bright fish shone like red gemstones— caught and glimmered in the weapons and ornaments of the noblemen, until the dark, stone-roofed hall seemed strewn with pearls.

With a sigh, I followed Atlanta's gaze, and with a sigh understood her silent warning. Although the distance was great, one thing was certain: the gentlemen had fixed their eyes upon Atlanta and me—or rather (I will not be vain) upon Atlanta alone, for even when I had stood among the arcades like the knights of Lord Framer of Akapana, my gaze had been only for her.

How did it happen that I fell asleep?

That's right, I had sat down on the stone edge of the water basin and at first gazed into it, and then I sank into the grass and felt the slow, proud movements of the ferns as they let their feathered fans glide through the air in the afternoon breeze, back and forth, in a sleepy and comfortable motion. And I heard the roar of many human voices deep at the foot of Akapana and from the distant harbor of the Lake of Aztlan. And I thought that down there a stream was rushing with many, many waves, inexhaustible and busy. It was the stream of people on the green earth, which I had known since time immemorial. For I knew the past, spread out behind me like a long road that fades backward into the blue distance beneath the horizon, and I knew the future like its mirror image, only paler and more indistinct, as if the gaze were trying to pierce thin veils.

But how well fate had guided me, directly to Atlanta Framer, the proud child of the Nordic knight, who, under a hot sun on the southern shell of the earth-star, was lord of the holy city of Aztlan. He was called Lord of Akapana, modest enough for the viceroy of the king in the Tiahusinju Highlands, but Akapana was more than just a fortress; it was the sun of the earth, reaching over the Andean highlands with its great salt lakes all the way to Cuzco. And Cuzco was the never-conquered city of the Ingas, the city of the people with yellow fur and slitted eyes, whose homeland is Zipangu, over the great sea.

To be sure, Akapana was only one of the lesser suns that borrowed its light from the mighty central sun Atlantis, but it had become quite independent, this lesser sun, because Framer of Nordland, Atlanta's father, had a willful, stubborn head when it came to matters of statecraft and knew how to assert it—even against the king of Atlantis. Framer had been accustomed from youth, as is the trait of great leaders, to make history. The Sumerian lords in Ur in Chaldaea, on the Euphrates beyond the Atlantic sea, owed to him the privilege of paying their taxes to Atlantis rather than into their own coffers, and the Ingas of Cuzco, because of him, had for years been writing urgent letters to Zipangu, their motherland in the Pacific.

Atlanta gestured with a barely lifted hand to the west, toward the wide blue Lake of Aztlan with its flat shores, along which, for long stretches, whole forests of reeds stretched out, until near the city the harbor works began. There, where the massive rectangles of the ancient royal tombs of Puma Punku cast their long shadows into the silent gardens of the dead—built on the broad foundation of triple terrace structures—the place teemed with people and fluttering banners.

The broad street by the high-lying former harbor was crowded with them, and it looked as though a ribbon of shining gold and sparkling precious stones shimmered along the edge of the blue, still lake of Tiahusinju. Outside, a small fleet of rowing boats grew from black dots to neat circles and finally to brown shells on white foam, and above them fluttered, on slender basket-crowned masts, the blue banners of the Kingdom of Atlantis with the silver swastika, the symbol of the earth-dominating sun.

"I see the father," said Atlanta Framer, and it seemed to me that a slight concern resonated in her tone as she said it. Perhaps she sensed, with the magical power of ancient noble races, unconsciously a grave misfortune approaching, despite the radiant evening sun and although there was no reason to suppose such misfortune possible. I, too, thought I saw the Lord of Akapana standing alone on the broad steps by the lake, motionless like a statue, and only the gleam of his helmet, touched by the western rays of the sun, revealed that there was life in that still, dark figure.

Framer of Akapana stood between two waving banners, the blue one of Atlantis and his own red-and-white one of Aztlan, and when the wind opened this banner for a moment, I recognized the sun-eagle Condor of the snow giants of the land of Tiahusinju Highlands, whose viceroy the knight Framer was, on behalf of the king.

The men who had been standing in the arcade had also stepped up to the fortress's parapet and were peering expectantly toward the harbor, whose wooden piers stood far below the stone harbor works. In earlier times, when the

lake had stood higher—long, unknown ages ago—these had served harbor traffic. When that was, we did not know. The history of the holy city of Aztlan was lost in a distant, gray antiquity. Now the ships had come closer and were turning in, as if they were all being guided at once by a single cord. With a faint droning, the hammer-beat of the shipmasters sounded from afar. Vaguely, the wind carried a martial music up to the lofty fortress, and I saw that Framer of Akapana raised his right hand in greeting. The diamonds on the rings of his hand flashed like green lightning.

And now something happened that unpleasantly interrupted the festivities for the reception of the Duke of Acora, the heir to the throne of the realm of Atlantis. No one had paid attention to the lake during the approach of the high guest's fleet, and I confess that I too, so captivated by the sight of the entering fleet, was taken by surprise, and when I turned my gaze to the lake, the calamity had already occurred. The mighty hill-fortress of Akapana, with its giant structures of glass-hard lava stone, received a violent jolt, as if the shell of the earth itself wished to heave upward. A muffled rumbling in the depths betrayed one of the earthquakes that Aztlan had so far survived unscathed, since the city was well and solidly built and had only a few multi-story buildings, as were customary in the golden Atlantis of the eastern sea. Immediately afterward, a whole series of smaller tremors set in, and Atlanta Framer clutched my arm to steady herself.

Although I, too, was badly frightened, I still had enough presence of mind not to let such an opportunity slip by, and so it happened that I took the daughter of the Lord of Akapana in both arms and kissed her on her red lips, just as her delicate, fine face, full of alarm, turned up to me. Sensibly, I let her go immediately afterward, and my gaze shot suspiciously to the group of gentlemen standing at the parapet who, just moments before, had been looking down at the harbor. Due to the earthquake, great unrest had broken out among the knights, so that they no longer concerned themselves with me or Atlanta.

I smiled with a deep sigh of relief, for I had won!

Thanks to the wild gods of the underworld! No one had seen that the stargazer of Aztlan, Godda Apacheta, had kissed the daughter of the knight Framer. I must confess, I harbored the wicked wish that the underworlders might continue to shake the crust upon which we otherwise stood so safely and well—but they did not grant me this favor, so I had to forego the continuation of my forceful and only seemingly necessary caresses.

Atlanta said nothing about the incident; she looked to the side and struggled not to laugh, but her cheeks, with their white, translucent skin, showed the flush of sensitive blood, and so much so that I thought I could see the rushing heartbeat in the delicate coloring. And the heartbeat seemed rather fast to me, though I could be mistaken. Well, I certainly had no need to reach under

my black scholar's mantle to determine whether my own heartbeats were still ordinary; I did not master the favorable situation quite so coolly after all. And I fear that, from the warmth which softly glowed around my eyes, Atlanta, too, could have discerned much if she had looked at me. Wisely, she did not, for she would have had to scold me then, and quite rightfully so. It was indeed a most unusual thing to kiss the daughter of the Lord of Akapana right on the mouth, in the presence of at least thirty of his knights and atop the broad platform of the fortress of one of Atlantis's greatest daughter-realms!

Atlanta's dress showed some water stains on the bodice and on her right sleeve, left by my rain-soaked cloak. Besides, the embroidery of my black official garb had apparently become caught in the region of her gown's neckline. As a result, a few pearls had been torn off, which now probably, albeit involuntarily, belonged to Atlanta; at least my searching eyes could not find the runaways on the black-lava-tiled floor.

And as I pondered the whereabouts of those fleeing pearls, I had to laugh, and Atlanta blushed so deeply that I was quite certain the precious pearls were not lost, only hidden. That I would someday recover them from my beloved was thus more than likely.

A movement among the knights at the parapet near the arcades of the stairway tore me from these reflections. From the lake came a faint, distance-muffled droning, like the splintering crash of breaking wood.

I heard Atlanta utter a soft cry and saw her, in horror, gesture with both hands toward the harbor.

The knights at the parapet tucked their swords beneath their arms and rushed, nearly stumbling over each other, to the stairs, into whose gloomy throat they vanished one after another in wild haste. I, however, remained standing, because I knew that at such a distance, no help was possible and that the crush at the harbor and on the waterfront would have made any assistance impossible anyway. Besides, I did not wish to leave Atlanta—and that, if I tell the truth, was the real reason for my staying, especially since the girl, overcome with terror, pressed her pale face into her hands.

What was happening down there at the harbor certainly looked dire enough; but still, it could not be all that dangerous. I could still make out the knight Framer of Akapana in his usual place on the uppermost step of the landing, but now he stood, legs spread like a tower, up to his bronze-armored knees in the swirling water, supporting with both arms a tall, slender man who had apparently just leapt ashore from the foremost ship. The ship itself, however, was pressed askew against the wooden pier and seemed to have sunk; it sat much lower than before, likely stuck fast with its keel on the bottom. The three other galleys lay on the beach, with broken masts and oars, and on their decks

teemed running and shouting figures. Saddled and bridled horses thrashed about wildly, and I saw some fall backward over the rail into the shallow shore water, soon climbing up onto the beach and galloping along below the high waterfront so that their golden stirrups flashed.

At the lake's edge, a wide ribbon of white foam swept along at an angle—a giant flood wave, hungrily licking up the tall shore terrace, so that the tightly packed crowds of onlookers cried out in terror and tried in vain to flee. Now the wave neared my old solar observatory, Kalasasaya, in the north of the city, surged through the open hall of the town hall that stood before it, and crashed powerlessly against the giant walls of the observatory. The workers, who on this festival day were idly seated on the parapets of the walls, watching the reception festivities for the Duke of Acora at the harbor, ran to the new, higher building that the king had donated to Aztlan. This flight was unnecessary—I could tell that from my lofty vantage point—but most likely, I would have run too if I had been in Kalasasaya. A deep calm came over me as I saw the wave rush past, for my old mother lived in the observatory.

In the broad trading harbor, where mainly the cargo ships of the Aztlan merchant lords lay, along with some customs war galleys of the king and the small, fast boats of Framer of Akapana—used to patrol against smuggling over the sea to Cuzco—all seemed for a while to hang in great danger. For the flood wave surged over the protective piers and roared into the wide basin, so that the galleys strained violently at their anchor chains and danced about as if they were in a storm on the high seas. Fortunately, ropes and anchors held, and only two warships crashed together because one of them had just been about to put out on night duty and was passing its sister ship when the wave hit. As a result, the trading harbor became very lively, and the agitated bustle of the sailors looked almost comical. Fortunately, we could not hear the harvest of curses uttered on this occasion.

The flood wave, hurled by subterranean powers from the depths of the Lake of Aztlan against the shore, quickly subsided and slid back into its old bed, and now, through the cries of the frightened people below at the harbor of Puma Punku, I heard the mighty voice of Lord Framer of Akapana—calm and controlled despite its volume, and without the slightest agitation, as if nothing had happened. He had released the man he had supported and now stood before him, composed and proud, and although the newcomer must have been wet—much wetter than I was from the rain—it nevertheless seemed that the two men below had the situation well in hand. One could not make out, from the platform of Akapana, what they were saying to each other, but the tone of their voices, echoing far and wide in exchange, had a calming effect on the people on the high waterfront. The shouting died down as quickly as it had erupted at the arrival of the wave, and only Framer's deep voice and the bright, piercing one of the Duke of Acora—a voice that floated through the quiet air like a clear trumpet call—crowned the moments that followed.

"Nothing has happened," I heard Atlanta say with a deep sigh of relief. That wasn't quite true—enough had happened, for four broken rowing galleys, which just moments before had proudly sailed across the blue lake with streaming banners like splendid swans, now lay helpless in the shore mud, their splintered frames stuck in the sludge at the western pier of Puma Punku. The splendidly dressed knighthood who had accompanied the Duke from Atlantis to Aztlan waded—no doubt muttering secret curses—through the shallow waters to the road, and their soiled and drenched finery was hardly a sight to make a particularly uplifting impression on the watchful native populace.

Nevertheless, it seemed to me that the dignity of the situation had been preserved—not only by the astonishing composure of the knight Framer, but perhaps even more by the carefree manner of the stately Prince of Acora, who, though dripping wet, stood before the eyes of hundreds of thousands who had witnessed the spectacle. I heard suddenly a roaring laughter break out at the harbor and saw the Duke waving cheerfully to the crowd. Presumably, with a witty remark, he had managed to master the awkward situation once and for all.

Such flood waves and tremors, sometimes mild, sometimes violent, had been occurring with increasing frequency of late, and I remembered that as a child I had experienced a similar—though much worse—time in Atlantis, the golden-hued royal city of our realm. My father was then a teacher at the state academy of arithmetic and healing arts, living in a suburb near the sea, and I remember as if it were today how we had to abandon our house because the coastal land was slowly and steadily sinking beneath the waves of the Atlantic. And the house was set on a considerable hill. I also recall the great joy when, after many weeks, the building reappeared from the flood and the sea relinquished my ancestral home. But it was badly damaged by the surf, since it had not been submerged deeply enough—quite unlike the palace of the Atlantean nobleman Gotburg, the last of an old Nordic family. He himself perished when the waters first rose suddenly. But his castle, after a long time, stood once again intact on the shore, as if nothing had happened.

Day after day, earthquakes shook the motherland to its foundations, and my father told me that the star-wise scholars on the Acorian mountain in the north of the realm had expressed the view that a wandering star, whose path must nearly match that of the earth and which, like the other wandering stars, seemed to orbit the sun near the plane of darkness[4], might be to blame for the wrath of the subterranean powers. At that time, similar news of disaster came from Aztlan, Egypt, Abyssinia, Sumeria, and Gondwana, and even from the northern lands.

The disaster passed by and was soon forgotten, but I did not forget it. Still a child in years, I went into the garden of our new city house to gaze at the

[4] This star, which orbited in the ecliptic, is the present Earth-moon, Luna. (Author's note.)

bright, great star, which seemed to grow paler night after night until it vanished from sight. It was then that I asked my father to let me study astronomy, and so the new star became my life's destiny.

Now I stood on the platform of the fortress Akapana in lofty Aztlan, and again the earth trembled; and the volcano Kjappia, which loomed above the horizon into the clear mountain air of the highlands, sent great clouds of smoke into the sky. Only a few weeks earlier had it begun its activity, and along with it, the distant volcanoes in the lake-Andes spewed smoke and fire from their throats, so that at night the sky glowed with a sullen red. No prayers helped against this, no matter how many were recited in the temples. Day after day, Kjappia hurled its dark clouds of smoke aloft and frightened the restless population of the land of Tiahusinju.

The stonemasons who quarried the green, hard lava at the foot of the volcano and brought it on the state fleet's cargo ships to Aztlan had to abandon their work and return to the city, as it had become impossible to work near the mountain. I had forgotten that Atlanta was standing beside me, had forgotten that the pearls from the embroidery of my black scholar's mantle were lost to the beloved woman—though not forever. I remembered nothing of the duke's arrival and his drenched knights, but looked up to the sky, along the path the sun had traveled during the day, and sought, at its opposite point, the star I had rediscovered only a few weeks before. For my eyes were sharper than those of Master Gülham, to whom I had been assigned by order of the king, as the scholar was already eighty years old and his other assistants did not possess the necessary scientific and magical training required of the disciples of astronomy at the academy in Atlantis.

The appointment to the observatory at Kalasasaya was a great honor for me, and yet I had not gladly gone to Aztlan—for what young scholar willingly leaves Atlantis, the golden city? And what young man, full of life, willingly seeks out the cold, rugged highlands of Tiahusinju when the palms beckon by the sea in Atlantis?

But the Ancient God, my friend and brother, meant well by me—if, indeed, he concerns himself with such matters, which I am inclined to doubt—for I had found Atlanta, and she is the most beautiful star I have ever discovered. I do not believe I shall ever find a more beautiful one. And in my heart, I named the star that shone at night as a luminous point, almost as a little radiant disk in the sky along the plane of darkness, "Atlanta" out of childish affection, because I believed she was my fate.

And I did not know that the wandering star "Atlanta" would also become the fate of the realm of Atlantis.

It was very strange—the bright star looked like a comet, but lacked a tail, and I would rather call it a nebulous star. Yet perhaps it was indeed a comet, even though, according to the records of our observatories, that uncanny wanderer was due to return at this time, if it actually had a path nearly matching that of the earth. Whether the star had appeared comet-like some twenty years ago, I did not know, as nothing was recorded in the tables, and I myself had not observed it.

I peered intently toward the east, but the star was still far below the horizon and could not be seen. Perhaps night would be more favorable for me, once I was dismissed from the reception for the duke in the hall of Akapana.

"The gentlemen are getting into the sedan chairs, Godda Apacheta," I heard Atlanta's voice beside me—just in time to save me from the magical spell that was drawing me once again into the star-garden of the Ancient One. Then I took Atlanta's hand and walked with her into the grove of tall ferns that bordered the artificial lake of Akapana on the west side, and once more I stood firmly upon the green earth. But before I could take the initiative—for I was looking for a spot in the leafy walkway that would be quite safe from the glances of prying envious eyes—Atlanta threw her arms around my neck and kissed me.

Atlanta was young and quick; she could certainly match me, though perhaps I had already grown a bit stiff. I was not quick enough to restrain her with the strength of my not inconsiderable arms, and so she slipped from my suddenly flaming insatiability, running, her white dress fluttering, through the arches of swaying fern fronds, and was out in the open.

There she cast a cautious glance toward the harbor and then crossed the platform of Akapana, walking along the water basin to her father's castle. And her gait—the most captivating movement of noble-blooded humanity—floated into my eyes like wonderful, delicate music, for all rhythm is music for eternity: tones the Ancient One knows how to play, masterfully, like everything he has created and raised up with love, heart-enchanting as all that he himself loves. And I knew that my friend and brother, the Ancient One, loved Atlanta, because he had lavished his art upon her, and that he wished to bless me with her love, to make me richer than all the kings of the world could ever be.

Then, as Atlanta vanished into the darkness of the heavy gilded portal and, with a single stroke, the platform of Akapana was empty, I embraced the slender trunk of a fern and sank to the ground, and the last pearls from my mantle must have torn off in the process. I only noticed it when it was far too late to change clothes—only when I stood before the duke.

The Duke of Acora looked with a somewhat astonished gaze at the sad remains of the embroidery, from which the twelve prescribed pearls were

missing. He knew me well from Atlantis, from the court of his father, the king, but even so, I could not expect him to refrain from a rebuke. Yet he had the kindness of heart, in the presence of Framer and his ladies and in the company of the knights of Aztlan and Atlantis, to suppress any reproachful remark. But I can still see the horrified look on Atlanta's face when I stepped before the prince, for she had only torn off three pearls—and now they were all gone!

To my old master Gülham, the duke said only, with a smile for which I would gladly have embraced the lord of Acora, that he intended to alter the official garb of the second star-sages at the royal observatories so that the twelve pearls, symbolizing the signs of the zodiac, would no longer be worn. This ornament, in future, would be reserved only for the directors of the state observatories, and he would grant a different insignia to the second-ranking officials.

The people present, by the way, were apparently of the opinion that I had suffered the damage during the earthquake, and were not nearly as surprised as Atlanta was. Only, I could not avoid the reproach of carelessness. The women and gentlemen who had suffered from the minor calamity of the floodwave had used the time before the scheduled reception in the hall of Akapana to ensure immaculate attire—and I could have done the same. Now, the duke's new regulation embarrassed me, as if I had somehow anticipated his intentions beforehand.

Framer of Akapana did not look at me very kindly, and although fortunately I was not directly under his command, those glances were not entirely pleasant. As a flawless and orderly soldier, I understood well enough his annoyance, and I did not hold it against him. His wife Dana, who had given birth to Atlanta—the masterpiece of the Ancient One—seemed to recognize the truth, and, as part of her daughter, must have come closer to the deeper reasons than was given to the others. Sensing this, I sat beside her as soon as the occasion allowed and kissed the tips of her fingers—those noble hands shaped by the cool north of the earth as two jewels of nobility and race.

"Be prudent, Godda Apacheta," she said softly to me, inclining her fine, serious face in a way that Atlanta sometimes did as well. "Before you went with my child into the grove, I saw the pearls still gleaming in the sun on your cloak. Take this as a warning, Godda. All the hopes of the earth float in the light air, and none is sometimes so delicate and vulnerable as the one that fills two human hearts."

I looked over at Atlanta, who was seated on a gold-worked bench and on silk cushions from the land of Zipangu, beside the Acora. The duke of the realm spoke in a low voice to Framer's beautiful child, and the slender, well-kept hands of the great prince played with the golden chain that hung down his pearl-studded surcoat.

But Atlanta, whose face I could see because it was turned toward me, looked into the man's sharp gray eyes with the confusing clarity of her own blue gaze, wholly unembarrassed—eyes whose power I sensed, even though the duke had half turned his back to me. Atlanta's expression was one of keen attentiveness, and now and then a friendly smile played around her delicate mouth, which, utterly passionless, slumbered in noble, self-assured calm beneath the gently curved nose, as if it knew nothing of kisses and sudden passion, of torn-off pearls and star-wise lovers who, in silent nights, dream of the star Atlanta, which is Godda Apacheta's destiny.

And as I thought of the star that had reappeared—still distant and, for the untrained eye, difficult to discern, and even then only at night—a tremor ran through the mighty gilded stone walls of the hall of Akapana, only a tremor, but it sent a chill through my heart, for the powers of the deep so clearly answered my thoughts.

Nevertheless, I did not take my eyes off Atlanta and the prince. Amid the unease that arose in the assembly as the stepped stone ceiling above the massive square pillars wavered slightly, the two people I watched sat unmoved and did not interrupt their pleasant conversation for a moment. Only Atlanta, for an instant, reached her hand toward her heart, and then let it sink back into her lap.

Framer of Nordland spoke reassuringly to a group of young girls who had come from Atlantis with the prince, daughters of noble Nordic families. They were destined for flower service in the Sun Temple, the world-famous Kalasasaya in Aztlan, where, under the protection of my old mother, they would remain for a time until they found a husband among the Atlantean lords of the highlands. Since the marriage of Nordic men with native girls was forbidden for reasons of racial preservation, this precautionary measure by the king in the distant motherland was always greeted with great joy, and there was something comical in seeing how the unmarried knights would secretly watch for the arrival of the new consignment, as they liked to call it.

Well, the mockery was cheap enough, but if the king had not provided women of noble race, then the lineage of the Atlanteans, on the cold giant mountains of Tiahusinju and in the cities of Aztlan, Guaka, Apacheta, Tarako, and Tikina, in the lonely castles and country estates of the borderlands, would soon have been doomed to extinction. After all, everyone knew how necessary these shipments of pure-blooded women from Nordland and Atlantis were, and the mockery was only a pretense. Seldom did two years pass between the arrival of new girls before the couples had found each other—without compulsion and purely out of inclination. Lady Dana Framer would bring the young people together for games and social gatherings, and success was never long in coming.

At first, I too had secretly scoffed, because I came from golden Atlantis, where Nordic maidens were abundant. But I soon recognized the plight of the mountainous borderland of Tiahusinju Highlands and laughed no more when the usually cheerful, lively girls disembarked from the ships and at first did only what they would never have done out of curiosity in the lowlands of Atlantis: namely, sleep and sleep again.

Even the men newly arrived from Atlantis did not escape this mountain sickness, which here took the form of a sleeping sickness lasting several days—if it can be called a sickness at all, which I doubt. And so today I saw the young ladies, amid laughter, yawning quite cautiously and with hands before their mouths, and Framer kept them awake with friendly jokes so that they would not fall asleep on a chair in the duke's presence.

When the tremor ran through the hall, the weariness vanished, and tense, crouched expectation hovered over men and women alike. Again the trembling coursed through the solid structure, and this time there was also the muffled rumbling from the earth, which so often follows earthquakes.

To those of us who knew Aztlan and the borderland, these movements of the earth were nothing new in themselves, and the royal builder and stonemason, Ruder Atakama—whose father had already built on the sanctuaries of Aztlan—knew that this hall would not collapse, for he had made it earthquake-proof, even if the shocks were ten times as strong as those we had today. The giant blocks of glass-hard lava from Mount Kjappia he had interlocked within so that they held together like a single mass and could only break apart if the material itself failed. But it was made from the hardest stone the borderland could offer, and it had never failed. Ruder Atakama had earned a certain renown with this construction method, for even the country's adversary—the slant-eyed Cuzcos under their foreign-blooded Ingas—built their fortresses on the border in a similar fashion, though they could not rival the high artistic perfection that slumbered in every stone of the Atlantean craftsman. Millennia-old nobility simply cannot be imitated; it must be acquired through long and rigorous discipline, and if the race is not good, all diligence and work are of little use. The Ancient One has his friends on earth, whom he loves more than other people. In that respect, perhaps, he is not just, but I have never believed in his outward justice, which blindly equates one with one, like the obstinate masters of arithmetic, and I never shall— even if the Ancient One should someday try to shake my faith.

Now the duke grew uneasy, though he tried to conceal it. In any case, he rose and led Atlanta Framer over to her mother. I at once vacated my place at Lady Dana's side and withdrew. But the duke nodded to me and ordered me to remain.

And while he spoke with me, he struggled to stifle a yawn that the thin highland air of Aztlan drew from him—though it could just as well have had another cause: his unease about the earthquakes that had occurred repeatedly today.

The builder Atakama stood nearby, betraying not the slightest sign of worry or unrest, beside a young lady whom his brother had, as it were, sent him from Atlantis for his consideration—one of those rare cases in which a pair was already destined for each other by family care, in the hope that the union would turn out well. Well, when such things are known from the outset, the rest is not difficult, once the first embarrassment has passed. I had to smile a little because the girl was already looking at the famous sculptor and architect with open adoration, and because Ruder Atakama, for his part, seemed not at all displeased by this affection. The young people took a liking to each other, there was no doubt about it. So all was in order here. I only hoped, quietly, that the builder would still find some time to finish my portrait bust, which was still half embedded in the stone. That the sculpture ultimately was not completed is, as I must note in advance, only to a small extent the fault of the young Atlantean woman.

The Prince of Acora followed my amused glance, and his mouth also curved a little into a smile—perhaps a mocking one, but marked by a noble kindness that made this man truly irresistible. And this quality of irresistible gentleness he possessed not only toward women; we men, too, were without exception subject to it.

“The stonemason did not even notice that his hall was swaying,” remarked the duke kindly.

I contradicted him with appropriate modesty. Atakama had, in fact, been the first to notice it, but he must have great confidence in the construction of this palace, for he could see nothing but the young lady from Atlantis.

With these words—which those nearby the duke also heard—I hoped to dispel the unease over the day’s repeated earthquakes; and I believe that the behavior of Ruder Atakama, for whom the world seemed to have vanished in the gaze of his beautiful new friend from Atlantis, had, after my remark, a calming effect on Framer’s guests.

“I have already expressed my appreciation to him for the progress of the work on your solar observatory, dear Godda Apacheta,” the prince continued. “Unfortunately, the work on the old tomb structure is at a standstill.” The Acora knew that the quarries at Kjappia were currently unusable because the liquid lava from the volcano was flowing into them, and for the time being it was also impossible to open another quarry due to the poisonous gases. The lava rocks from Kjappia were almost a day’s journey away by sea and land. The people

who built in Aztlan in earlier times must have had an easier time bringing the stones, for back then the lake was forty feet higher, and the massive stone harbor structures, which today stand high and dry on the plain, must have greatly facilitated the unloading of the giant blocks. The old shoreline, which had once marked the boundary of the lake, could still be seen on the distant mountains. In any case, it was no longer possible to determine the date numerically, since this higher lake once lapped at the piers of the high-lying harbors. According to the traditions that I had to memorize for my state examination at the academy in Atlantis, the city of Aztlan was an age of the world old. That may be a rather imprecise term, since it cannot be rendered in any particular time scale, but it is clear and unambiguous if, like we star-scholars, one knows that the city of Aztlan was built before the Great Flood. That flood reached even into the sky-high mountains of the Andes and, in those fateful days, played out as a deluge.

The harbor structures must have originated from those grey days. And since the history of the realm of Atlantis was only counted in a few tens of thousands of years, insofar as it was written down, one can see that the age of the harbor works might be ten to twenty times greater.

As the prince wished to be introduced to the young knights he did not yet know before the banquet, he left us to endure this perhaps somewhat tedious princely duty. Well, Lord Framer kept it brief and to the point, and the young gentlemen had scarcely answered the duke's few questions before the Lord of Akapana was already quietly bringing forward the next. Once the newcomers had survived their great moment, the Acora still had to greet the long line of old acquaintances—and that with mountain fatigue in his light-headed brain.

Lord Framer of Akapana was visibly glad to be free for a moment and visited us at the throne seat of Atlanta's mother, Lady Dana. I smiled fondly at the father, for he looked quite different than usual. Although he was an Atlantean, he did not care for excessive ornament on his clothes, and at ordinary times one would more often see him in a plain surcoat with his bronze sword than, as today, in a festive garment set with diamonds, which only pretended to be a surcoat in name. He knew very well himself that he looked good in the jewelry of his glittering golden diadem, but he dimly felt that the worries lurking in the borderland of the Tiahusinju Highlands did not really suit the lavish adornments prescribed by the king from the sunny motherland for his warriors of noble birth and descent. Even if I still had my twelve pearls, I would have presented the image of old Nordic simplicity, the kind people in Atlantis spoke of when they thought of the original homeland in the far north, where Framer's home was.

Now, I was neither a man of war nor a sword-bearing knight, but in one respect I was Framer's subordinate—namely, in war—and then it was my honor to command thirty men, all of whom knew much more than I, telling them what to do. For in times of emergency, I was a captain, and in the realm of Atlantis,

anyone who could not wield a sword had to pay double taxes and, except in rare cases, was not granted a wife. Racial preservation was the source of Atlantis's power; otherwise, our highly cultivated and ancient lineage would soon have lost its hold.

Framer approached me with old Master Gülham, the director of the Kalasasaya solar observatory. Gülham wore the same black attire as I did—the long black robe reaching almost to the feet, and the twelve pearls on the embroidery of his breastplate, which I was no longer to wear in the future. That I would be allowed, to satisfy my vanity, to wear a diamond clasp under the breastplate, I did not yet know; and, irreverent as it may sound, I was not concerned about it, either. I was convinced that Atlanta knew well enough how to judge the man beneath the long scholar's robe, and that the external ornamentation of my official garb would not influence the contents of my skull. As a scholar of the king of Atlantis, I was one of the highest-paid officials of the realm. Pearls and diamonds did not tempt me, unless they glittered on the brow of my tall, noble maiden, Atlanta Framer.

I bent over the hand of my great master Gülham and hinted at a kiss befitting his high spiritual rank—a kiss he did not really like, unless the young girls, who hung their floral wreaths around the black columns of the triple corridors in his Kalasasaya, pressed their soft, youthful lips upon his distinguished old hand. Gülham was human, as much as he had to play the demigod when he greeted the rising sun of Atlantis before the devout people or, at the head of the priestly procession, solemnly paced the terraces and corridors. Gülham's body, somewhat stooped with age, bore a mighty, tall skull crowned by our scholar's turban. This uncomfortable article of clothing we wore only rarely—on ceremonial occasions like today—but it sat very tightly on the head and pressed on the forehead, since it was made of blackened gold and was therefore quite heavy. I readily admit that I was not yet fully cured of the youthful frivolity that I had brought with me from my academic chair in Atlantis to this cold mountain region. I had already had an official turban made for myself in the motherland out of thin, rolled copper sheet, which served as well as the gold one, since it was blackened anyway. Besides, it had the advantage of being lighter than the heavy gold headpieces.

I, too, had the high skull that distinguished all of us scholars, but as may be known, this was not our natural skull shape, but one that was deliberately cultivated. My father, fortunately, did not think much of excessive skull modifications, though the successes of the doctors outweighed the regrettable failures.

When a good mind—perhaps one surpassing the ordinary—was recognized in us who were to become scholars, our heads were bound in early youth, in such a way that the front part of the brain developed highly, while the back of the head was slightly neglected. At my father's request, my head was

treated very gently, and I doubt whether I would have been any less foolish had I possessed an even mightier forehead.

Master Gülham, by contrast, had had his skull bound extremely forward. As a result, he looked, when standing before you, impressive and magnificent, though something was missing at the back. Knowing this, and a little sensitive about it, the old man wore an insert at the back of his turban—a forgivable deception, since in his office he was otherwise obliged to maintain both appearance and dignity. Gülham, as a late effect of the binding of his, already surely very clever, head, had suffered a severe inflammation of the bones of the cerebral cortex and lay deathly ill when I arrived in Aztlan two years ago.

Since I enjoyed the reputation of being a good doctor, and had already successfully performed trepanation on several patients in Atlantis, I was able to demonstrate that one can even bring help to old men of seventy-eight with knife and bone saw. Using local anesthesia with coca sap, I had managed to save Master Gülham. On the plate that I fitted into the opening in his aged skull—a plate made from a durable gold and silver alloy—I engraved, on the inside, a pictorial inscription, of which the bearer fortunately had no inkling. And since I have only written the history of the realm of Atlantis and its downfall into the stars, and not preserved it in any permanent record, let it be confessed here that the following question is inscribed on the inside of the gold plate in Gülham's head: "Is it really that confused in there?" For it had struck me, in all my procedures on the cranial cavities of my patients, that the strange, tangled convolutions of the outer brain layer are perhaps a rather bitter joke of my friend in the garden of his universe. I need hardly assure you that with a man like Gülham I was far from any malice, and that only the faintest poison—such as even comets exhale—was in my soul as I wrote that questioning inscription.

Still, to inscribe it in the head of the first star-sage and highest cleric of Aztlan is perhaps somewhat improper.

A difficult time lay ahead for Gülham and me. The twelve-year cycle had come full circle, and the great pilgrimage festival of the entire Atlantean world to the national sanctuary on the cold plateau of Tiahusinju was to take place once more. For me, this festival was new, but I remembered from my youth how, back then, many ships with pilgrims had set out from Atlantis for Aztlan, and that the then-Duke of Acora, our present king, had taken part in that pilgrimage, just as the young prince was undertaking it today.

This time, the realm had the satisfaction of counting the Inga of Cuzco among the pilgrims—a sign that, at least for now, the constant frictions and battles with the Zipangu people were to cease.

At first, the envoy of the Inga was supposed to lodge with me at the Kalasasaya, but I was able to prevent this. I had an insurmountable aversion to the slant-eyed, braided people with yellow-brown skin and their unclean smell, and I had not been able to get used to it, even though I had lived among them for two years. Aztlan's main population consisted of Zipangu people, along with, to be sure, an incredible mixture of races ranging from yellow to deep brown, so that everything seemed to go dark before one's eyes when walking through the streets of the holy city.

However, for reasons unknown to me, Lord Framer of Akapana decided to accommodate the Inga's envoy and his companions in his castle—perhaps out of statesmanlike prudence, to win over the Cuzco, whom he had not yet been able to overcome, by peaceful means.

I was sent out to fetch the strangers from their room.

Framer was a master at assigning honors by degree. The Inga had not been conquered by the sword, but he had submitted and requested permission to be present at the gigantic pilgrimage festival of almost the entire Atlantean world.

I fetched the foreign gentlemen, who were already waiting somewhat impatiently. I had prepared myself for unpleasant faces, but was pleasantly surprised that the gentlemen at least appeared reasonably intelligent, without any excessively pronounced racial features that were considered inferior not just by me.

When I returned to the hall with my "yellows," I saw the Acora sitting on the golden throne, which until then had been empty, and which was used only every twelve years by the heir to the throne of the Atlantean world empire.

I must confess, the bearing of the Prince of Acora was downright regal, and his powerful gray eyes rested unshakably, with an inimitable majesty, on the small men whom the Inga had chosen as envoys to the noblest realm on earth. Unfortunately, such displays of high state dignity often tickle my insides, so that laughter comes more readily than reverent awe.

But I had my satisfaction.

When the envoys of the Inga, according to their incomprehensible and undignified custom, had prostrated themselves flat before the prince's throne, a bright, splendid laughter came into the kingly man's gray eyes, though his face remained motionlessly serious. And I saw how Atlanta gazed at the prince's eyes with pleasure, with the childlike devotion of one drawn to a favored man whose true seriousness is an inner, radiant cheerfulness, and whose millennia-deep humanity is utterly captivating—whether one wills it or not. I saw well

enough that not one of the many blossoming maidens from Atlantis and Aztlan could resist this charm; yes, even Dana Framer, Atlanta's mother, looked upon the regal man on the golden throne with shining blue eyes. Still, it struck my heart like a thin, thin arrow. And I thought of Mother Framer's words: "All hopes float in the light air."

Yet I did Atlanta an injustice then, and the wrong done with the heart weighs a thousand times heavier than all unworthy deeds done in action, because it is more cowardly than those.

And cowardice is always unworthy.

But who can argue with a heart into which an arrow has flown? Is not such a heart ill? Certainly, it is not mortally ill—for such an arrow is far too thin and fine, and it does not kill—but nevertheless, the heart remains afflicted.

Did the Ancient One wish to cast sword and gauntlet between the prince and me?

Then the duke's gaze met me, brief and understanding. Ah, I knew that this scion of millennial ancestors, with the interpretive power of his magical soul, felt my deep pain, even if he perhaps did not yet know the reasons.

Or had he sensed with his fingertips that I was thinking of sword and gauntlet?

And as his gaze penetrated deep into my eyes, I spread my arms, lifting them only slightly—but I had to do it—and in his eyes there appeared a warm gleam.

Then I knew that I was captive, bound in devotion to a masterpiece of the Ancient One, on which his love had perhaps worked and formed for an age of the world before he set this man upon the earth—just as he had done with Atlanta.

All this lasted no longer than I tell it; rather, it seemed to me like fleeting flashes of understanding and like the warm, gentle stream of disarming manhood flowing over me like a silver current—fearless, but full of ultimate insights, so far as such are breathed into a man by the mouth of the Ancient One.

And now I heard the duke speak, and I was not surprised that he spoke the Nordic tongue, though he could speak Zipangu just as well—or perhaps only slightly less well—than Lord Framer or I. But in the realm of Atlantis, there were only Nordic words, and the foreigner had to use them.

I translated the words of the Prince of Acora for the three envoys of the Inga and bade them rise.

Then I felt Atlanta's gaze and turned around, because now, because of the arrow, I wanted to ask forgiveness, even if only with a look. And I saw that her eyes shone with moisture, as if she were suffering from a great pain or a deep rapture—which is, in chosen women, the sister of pain. And as I magically knew past and future—not with the knowledge of the intellect, which tells man only the visible and what dead numbers can prove, but with the ancient knowledge that has slumbered in my blood through countless generations, since the sun was the only great star dominating the sky and there were no others—then, within me alone, there ran the tremor of a soul-quake, just as sometimes happens to the earth when the underworld powers shake it.

Edmund Kiß

The Hammer of Fate

I had to laugh at the builder Ruder Atakama ever since he married his girl from Atlantis—and he was married just a few weeks after the arrival of Lord Acora and his entourage. Gülham had officiated the ceremony, and I, too, was present, watching and listening as the two lovers promised each other everything the aged priest required of them.

The stonemason's good spirits could not be broken by any amount of work or frustration—and he had both in abundance, frustration as well as work. Despite being overburdened in both respects, this excellent man still always found time in the evenings to take up his chisel and work on the completion of my bust, which still lay half-buried in the hard lava stone but already reproduced, with surprising fidelity, my somewhat prematurely aged face, with its curved nose and narrow lips. I was especially pleased that the stonemason did not care to make me especially handsome, but sculpted me, copper hat and all, just as he saw me. I often sat quietly in his workshop among clay models and unfinished sculptures, patiently enduring his scrutinizing eyes as they wandered from the stone block to my face and back. I had to wear my metal hat because the bust was not intended for my own use, but was to be placed in the Kalasasaya, where all the star-sages of Aztlan were immortalized. My stone head remains unfinished. It lies in the inner corridor of the solar observatory, deep beneath the mud of the lake that now covers the sanctuary, and should it one day be found, Godda Apacheta asks forgiveness for not being more beautiful. And if the finder, full of amazement, discovers that a northern face is staring back at him—on the highlands of the Andes, on the southern half of the green earth—may he gather from the faint smile on the stone mouth that it is not inclined to reveal its secret, unless the finder retrieves it from the stars, where I have written it.

For more than a hundred years, the Atlanteans had been working on the restoration of the holy city of Aztlan, whose fate it was that many generations of men built upon it but never finished it, whether because the great flood interrupted the work or some other event intervened. Our ancestors had left us nothing to complain about, as far as the durability of the walls was concerned, but great artists too had left their mark in the holy city, and all who came to Aztlan admitted without envy that Atlantis might be more splendid and richer, but did not possess the noble simplicity and grandeur of this oldest city on the face of the earth.

Already the highlands and the peninsula of Aztan teemed with pilgrims from all the countries of the globe—which we scholars believed to be a sphere, since one could sail in a single direction and arrive again at the starting point, whether after a year or a year and a half, depending on the favor of the winds. The immense tent cities had already been erected all around, for the city itself, as large as it was, could not accommodate the enormous number of pilgrims.

And we had to forego providing for the unheard-of demand for housing that arose only every twelve years at the solstice festival. Nevertheless, our Zipangu people had erected lightweight guesthouses of adobe in many places, and their colorful banners and pennants fluttered on the mountains and in the plains, along the lakeshore, and across the whole peninsula as far as our fortress barricades on the road to the Tiahusinju lowlands, whose round, stepped cones stood like strange pointed hats in the thin air. And beyond them shone dazzling white the snow-covered summit of Mount Illimani, which we regarded as the highest of both Andean peaks.

The religious ceremonies in the Kalasasaya would not begin for a few days, when the sun would reach its winter solstice in the morning and begin to wander back across the sky for half a year. We astronomers could determine this time exactly, because the eastern corner pillars marked the sun's turning points when observed from the base of the ancient Sun Gate. This Sun Gate was a relic from ages past, inscribed with a pictorial script we could not decipher. Even so, the king in Atlantis had decreed that the gate be incorporated into the new structure at the heart of the old observatory and that the sculptures on either side be continued as an unbroken band, for it was certain, at least, that the images were meant to depict the cycle of the year.

To make the observatory at least temporarily usable for the festival, Atakama had to halt the sculptural work and, on a mighty wooden raft, floated the venerable sanctuary from the workshop to its foundation, carried along in a deep water trench that he had dug to that point.

As a result, both the duke and I were quite astonished when, one day, the gate stood in its proper place, its wooden raft base hidden in a sea of red roses and under cleverly arranged blue banners, so that the jack-of-all-trades Atakama had managed to achieve the nearly impossible: the apparent completion of the new solar observatory at the heart of the ancient sanctuary. He had even built the missing part of the enclosing walls in wood and had them painted so that it was almost impossible to distinguish what was real and what was only appearance.

The prince regarded the completed work with great satisfaction. His delight in the ornate gate was nearly passionate—not because the sculpture displayed special artistic perfection (in that respect the Atlantean stonemasons were already more accomplished), but because of the mysterious content of the pictorial script.

The division of the year into twelve parts, as depicted on the gate, was inexplicable to us, for we knew of no such twelvefold division, since the sun indicated only full years, not any subdivisions thereof. And for us, the sun was the only measure. Furthermore, our year had 365 days, whereas the year on the gate comprised 288, or, if one took the suggestion of two additional signs as

days, 290 days. Neither Gülham nor I—despite my knowledge of the traditions of Atlantis, Nordland, and Aztlan, perhaps more than any scholar before me—could give the duke a satisfactory answer. We did know, to be sure, that before the Flood a second celestial body existed alongside the sun, which was now no more, but we did not know its movements and could only surmise that the division of the year into twelve parts referred to that body. But since this was entirely uncertain, the meaning of the pictorial script remained hidden to me as well.

Incidentally, it is to the credit of Acora—though an unfruitful credit—that he later, after many years, discovered part of the explanation one dark night on the Atlantic Ocean, as he stood at the helm of his last ship and led the last nobility of mankind northward.

By the way, the builder Atakama probably got to the heart of the matter most accurately with his childlike powers of thought, for he explained to the prince that, in his view, at the time the gate was made, the year had only 288 days and was divided into twelve parts. He could not, however, provide proof of this, but there was no reason to dispute that his predecessor, who had once fashioned the gate, was at least as foolish or wise as he himself. And just as Atakama would certainly take care never to depict the year as having 288 days, so too had the stonemason who carved the gate refrained from chiseling a year of 365 days, since it is justified to suppose that all stonemasons of all times love their lodges too much to endanger them by obvious nonsense.

There was nothing to be said against this, and we all laughed—not least Acora himself, who then uttered the phrase that many princes are said to have spoken throughout the history of earthly realms: “If I were not Acora, I would like to be Atakama.”

This small matter had the effect on me that, from then on, I no longer doubted the correctness of the depictions on the Sun Gate, but only left open the explanation, which my own time would probably never discover.

We watched the workers for a while—strong Zipangu types, whose skulls are bound backward in early youth to preserve them as a people for physical labor.

One of them, who was just holding the silver plumb line, attached to a thin twisted cord, against the gate to check if it was upright, stumbled over the wooden threshold of the enormous stone block and dropped the plumb line, so that it slid down the slope into the water-filled trench. The presence of the prince spared him a scolding for his carelessness. But I often thought, on dark nights, of that silver plumb line lying lost at the foundation of the Sun Gate. Will it ever again fall into a human hand, now that the Kalasasaya is buried? And what will the finder think, holding in his hand the simple tool of builder Atakama?

The worker ducked and turned his slanted, bound skull toward the prince of Acora. But nothing bad happened to the poor man. He was, after all, a simple laborer, faithful and diligent, and a moment's carelessness was not a crime for which his bound brain could be held responsible.

We Atlanteans knew from a thousand years of history, full of conquests and reversals, that only a caste of higher men can rule the ball of this beautiful earth, and that inferior races must be formed for those purposes that benefit the flourishing of a world empire. There may be a certain harshness in this unshakeable law established by our forefathers, but a highly bred, yet numerically small, people can only defend itself from the flood of inferiors by such measures, thanks to its superior intellect. It is a sign of finely bred lineages to be rare and vulnerable—not so much in body as in soul. And at times I have the strange thought that the era of the Atlantean race might come to an end unless it is somehow remade. Immigration from Framer's homeland, the Northland, is perhaps still the source of our strength today. But when I think of my teeth, which at so young an age are already gold in two places, and consider that the king of Atlantis has only one son, my duke of Acora, as heir to the throne, I almost believe we have indeed grown old—so old that the Ancient Friend is not older still.

But it is unworthy and ugly to perish like a senile dog, unable or even unwilling to defend oneself! May the Great Friend, in the vastness of his garden, prevent such a fate of shame from befalling our summit-race. Better to die in a tremendous struggle, in a downfall without equal, the gleaming shield on the breast and the battered visage, still full of noble dignity, turned toward the sky of the Ancient One! Not victory is the happiness of this star, but only the struggle—by sword and by mind, which weigh almost the same.

For sword and mind are two similar companions, both cutting sharply and both bearing the burden of all decisions on earth, and I hardly know to which I should give precedence.

I think the stars, to which I send these words in hope that they might one day whisper their wisdom—if it is wisdom—to some man who understands and knows their language, will smile at Godda Apacheta, the scholar of Aztlan. So long as the Ancient One laughs at me, you may smile too!

Keep my words well.

Perhaps someone can use them, though I do not know today who it will be.

In such matters I trust my Ancient Friend out there; for as little as he is troubled by pity, so much does he value dignity and greatness—not counterfeit,

but the outpouring of the serenely earnest soul, of which his favorites partake according to his favor. Thus will he also judge proud Atlantis rightly. He let us live as lords, so he will also grant us to perish as heroes, if we are truly old and our time is past. We desire only our fate—at least I do, and, as I know Acora, so does he. And I know it certainly of Atlanta—she is, after all, my own fate.

"I greet the new star," I said quietly, and the duke turned his narrow skull to me and his magical eyes drank at my soul. He smiled.

"What did you call it?" he asked, though he must have known that the star-sages had named it twenty years before and that it was listed in the star charts of our observatories as "Heldung," after its first discoverer.

"Atlanta," I replied firmly; for I could no longer, nor did I wish to, lie. Acora did not take his eyes off me and nodded.

"From now on, it shall be called 'Heldung-Atlanta.' I will order the star charts to be corrected accordingly."

And again my soul trembled in a tremendous quake—magical fate shook it, aged and wise, yet resolved without fear to bear whatever might come.

That was our heavy burden, that we must bear both the gravity of the earth and the most delicate sensitivity of the soul, which has its seat beyond this weighty earth—and I believe that young races do not yet know this deep sorrow that is hidden within it. Yet I would not wish to be without it, for even old age is sweet when it rests in young bodies in thousand-year chains.

And once more I listened as Gülham, the old priest of the sun, spoke of the coming festival.

He spoke of the last festival of Aztlan. Why did he do this? Did he believe he would not live to see his ninety-second year, when the festival would be renewed? I did not ask, but Acora nodded, as if he understood the old man correctly.

"The king is evacuating the coastal cities of Atlantis," he said calmly, as though we had long been speaking about the effect of the new star. "What will happen here, none of us know."

That the king was ordering the evacuation of the coastal cities was news to me. Evidently, the observatories of the realm had issued warnings, since they knew the effects of the last close approach of the wanderer "Heldung-Atlanta" and had taken them into account for its present near-passing.

Of course, we scholars did not believe the foolish interpretation of the lower classes—that the new star aroused the wrath of the demons beneath the earth's crust—but since we ourselves had no scientific explanation for the harmful effect of this wanderer, we let the popular belief stand, especially as it had considerable advantages of its own.

Gülham was able to tell us much of interest about the last passage of the new star, Heldung-Atlanta, twenty years ago—things I knew from the reports of the aged master in the library of the Atlantean observatory on Mount Acora, but only in the scientifically terse form such reports usually take. Back then, the event, which had affected the motherland Atlantis quite significantly, passed over Aztlan without more serious consequences. Apart from the eruption of the volcano Kjappia—which until then had been considered extinct—and a number of similar mountains in the Lake Andes, there were only isolated severe earthquakes. But thanks to the city's exceptionally solid construction, especially its large buildings, no other damage occurred, except that the man-high drainage canal that emptied the artificial lake atop the fortress Akapana into the harbor canal collapsed at one point. The damage, of course, was soon repaired.

Did the aged Gülham conclude from those events of long ago that it was not necessary to cancel or interrupt the solstice festival? It seemed so, for he spoke of the pilgrims from all over the world who were already on their way and for the most part had already arrived in Aztlan. Moreover, it would not be advisable to cancel such a festival, which lasted from summer solstice to winter solstice, since the economic loss for the coffers of the realm and the Kalasasaya would be too great, quite apart from the bad impression such a cancellation would make in all the countries of the earth.

But why did he speak first of the last festival? Did he scorn the premonitions in his breast and the warnings from the last passage of the star Heldung-Atlanta, and act as if he had no concerns? Perhaps he quietly believed that disaster would once again pass by without causing harm?

Therefore I did not reveal that I was of a different opinion, and thought it better, given the growing danger of earthquakes, to keep such a large crowd of people away from Aztlan. But in the end, the influx of pilgrims could no longer be stopped, and one had to hope that all would go well.

Nevertheless, the repeated tremors of recent times had made me quite thoughtful. Even now, the star Heldung-Atlanta stood at night as a rather small but brilliantly shining disk in the band of darkness through which the wandering stars move, yet it outshone even the brightest spark of our glorious, clear nights—the star of love—many times over. The bitter gift, however, of foreseeing future things with unknown soul-force now weighed on me with heavy chains.

Uncanny phenomena in the weather of our highlands whispered of coming danger. Storm-like whirlwinds swept in, with only short pauses, from the direction of the great lake and from the ice-covered giants of the Andes, whose heads, on either side of the Aztlan valley, rested in distant and solitary majesty. Over the Andean chain facing toward the Great Sea that points to Zipangu, the black, flame-flickering banners of smoking volcanoes waved and at times sent their thin white ash as far as the holy city in the borderland of the realm of Atlantis.

Today, the sun shone once more through a thin veil, and it was almost hot, as it tends to be beneath the belt of the equator, where the sun stands nearly at the zenith. The morning thunderstorm, with its heavy hail, had been brief and not as violent as the storms of recent weeks, but everything that happened remained unusual, even if Gülham assured us that it had been similar twenty years before.

Curiously, the immense mass of pilgrims who had arrived in Aztlan, and those who arrived day by day, did not seem particularly troubled. Some came from parts of the earth where such storms were nothing unusual and where volcanic mountains with their tongues of flame were well known. Those who had come from the lowlands of Atlantis, the golden islands in the midst of the eastern sea, knew from the tales of others that neither travel nor a stay on the Tiahusinju high plateau was associated with comforts. The presence of the Duke of Acora and the unconcerned attitude of the numerically small ruling class of Atlanteans may also have contributed greatly to stifling any unrest that might have arisen.

The power of the leader over those he leads can be immense, and such power existed here; let no one reproach me as arrogant or accuse me of unreasonably placing my homeland too highly above other lands and peoples. It was not without reason that the Zipangu people of the highlands called us children of the sun and prostrated themselves in the dust when the banner with the sun symbol of the realm of Atlantis was carried by, even though no command had ever been issued that such lowly homage should be paid to the emblem of royal power.

Forgive me if I speak little of the shadows of my race. Those shadows were certainly present among us as well, and I knew them well; never should anyone think that we considered ourselves infallible and perfect. That would be a ridiculous caricature of a great people and would give the lie to the truth. But when, with a burning heart, I write the history of the downfall of a noble race into the stars—the noblest race the Ancient One ever chose with masterful hand from the turmoil of nations and set beside his sun for millennia, working and refining it to shape his noble image through careful tending of generations—then you will understand me. I speak of my people as they were regarded by the Ancient One, and by myself, and the radiant light of this race should

overshadow the darkness that lies over all things, and even more so over the people who struggle for their higher soul on earth.

And if I portray myself too favorably to you—perhaps out of a bit of vanity, or because I am not honest enough—know that sometimes I also describe myself as my most ardent wish would shape me.

Nobility lies in the will and in the striving to elevate the soul. I know it myself, and let all who can read this message from the stars know it too: that the wave "I" crashes on dirty shores. Only the will toward the goal is good. I do not seek rest at the goal, for the goal fills me with dread, because the goal is the end.

But with that part of myself in which I am unworthy, I want to be unworthy with noble defiance and bear what the Ancient Friend has given me in dross. Therefore I raise, high above this account of the realm of Atlantis and its downfall, the banner of nobility, which dwells in the soul and strives for perfection, though it can never be reached.

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We left the builder Ruder Atakama and his Sun Gate and descended the steps to the lowest passageway of the inner sanctuary, where my mother's and my own apartments were on the inner west wall.

Here, the prince showed my aged mother the honor of visiting her and delivering the greetings of her second son. He was the king's governor in Gondwana, the island realm that lies behind the continental shelf of Zimbabuye. The prince had visited my brother a few years before and could tell my mother much about him.

And while Acora sat on my mother's left side, speaking to her with the reverence of a son, not as a man destined to command the world one day, I stood before Atlanta Framer, who had come down from Akapana to bid my mother farewell.

Ah, I knew very well why Atlanta was to travel to the royal court on the golden islands in the Atlantic Sea, to my homeland, where green malachite paved the city streets and the castles of kings were covered with gold, and the portals and window frames of state buildings glittered with pearls and gems.

All hope floats in the light air, and none is more vulnerable than that of two loving hearts! Dana Framer had whispered these words to me when the duke of the realm sat beside Atlanta in Framer's hall at Akapana, dipping his sharp gray eyes into the stars that were my happiness and my fate. I did not ask, for I knew that Lord Framer was hard, as men must be whose lives have been endless struggle, victory, defeat, and ever new struggle. The king had thanked

the old hero for Sumeria in Chaldea, and would have to thank him for Cuzco too, unless Atlantis's fate was fulfilled first.

But Atlanta could not lie. She had the high nobility of a chosen soul, which I had always envied her, and she had told her father the truth about her and me.

Now I saw, with deep shame, that I had wronged her when, for a moment, I doubted her—that I had fallen into a fateful error when I thought the arrow, that thin arrow in the hall of Akapana, had been sent into my heart by her innocent hand.

What it meant to make such a confession to a man like Framer of Nordland, which his daughter had given him, could only be understood by one who knew the ruler of Aztlan's ambitious intentions and who had felt the force of his unbending will like a wild mountain torrent. I could hardly even call his intentions ambitious, for Framer stood close to the throne of Atlantis, by birth and by merit, and as a direct descendant of the first Nordic family could claim older noble birth than even the king himself. Framer had every right to claim the duke of Acora, and it was almost self-evident to the governor that his glorious child could be the wife of no other man than the future king of the earth. Framer had sacrificed four sons to the realm, who had fallen facing the enemy in the borderlands of all four directions. Four sons was the blood toll he had paid to the king and the realm—so it was just and right that the children of Atlantis should rise to rulership over the world. And now Atlanta's announcement, that she loved me—the simple scholar and star-sage, Godda Apacheta—struck like a sudden bolt of lightning into the proud plans of his house.

It did not surprise me at all that I had received no message—not even a friendly letter from her parents, perhaps stating for this or that reason that they could not agree to their daughter's union with the Apacheta, nor was I summoned to a serious discussion with the father, in which he might have explained that his plans for Atlanta were of another kind and that I must renounce her hand.

Nothing of the sort happened. Lord Framer knew me too well and must have sensed that I would not give in, and as for his daughter, he knew she was of his own blood, born of his hard will, and if she told him she loved the Apacheta, it was no jest and not some insignificant obstinacy of a lovesick girl that could be disregarded, but rather, it was a matter of the utmost seriousness.

Evidently, Lord Framer had recognized this and, perhaps to buy time, had set one condition, from which he did not waver. Atlanta was to go to the court of Atlantis for two years—a year earlier than had already been intended—so that she might get to know other people and test herself to see whether she wished to remain steadfast in her decision.

Atlanta had agreed to this—not gladly, certainly, since she knew well that the separation from me would not be easy. And as she now stood before me and looked into my eyes, which perhaps no longer seemed joyful because I would have to do without the woman I loved for so long, a happy smile passed over her face, for she saw the pain of her departure in me and felt it as a gentle, sorrowful caress. She walked with me to the window, which sat as a stepped semicircle in the thick wall, and placed herself so that the light fell on me.

"My darling," she said softly, as if she wished to return my caress for the pain.

Many a woman in Atlantis had spoken thus to me—perhaps more often than I had thought—but even so, tears welled up in my eyes as I heard the voice of my fate speak those tender words. And then she continued, softly and flowing, that she would not go to the royal court, for she knew she would succumb there. She was still so young that she did not know how she could withstand the influences that would assail her at court.

With deep wonder at such prescient awareness of the overwhelming powers of the Atlantean world—to which a young woman, raised in solitude on the cold mountain heights of a borderland, must slowly and inevitably succumb, if the effect of constant influence wore her down—I listened to the beloved voice, whose pure sound made me a child again. I heard that Dana Framer wanted to give her a letter for her sister, who was the prioress in the Sun Temple on Mount Acora, just as my mother was in the Kalasasaya of Aztlan; and the influence of this sister at court was not insignificant, since the king had loved her in his youth and perhaps could never forget her. This woman was to ask the lord of the realm to assign Atlanta to the solar sanctuary of Acora. There, in the cold mountain heights of one of the northernmost islands of the motherland, she would have her home, and not in the golden city. As a servant of the observatory, she was to prove herself before things she did not know, and before powers whose force she perhaps was not equal to.

"Are you afraid of the duke?" I asked openly, as was fitting between her and me.

Atlanta shook her head; it was not the duke she feared, but the power of his young eyes, in whose depths the wise kindness of great age slumbered, which would draw her in, whether she willed it or not. But the other... Now she faltered, for what she wanted to say, she could not express—but I sensed, with inexpressible delight, that her blood called out to me ever since we kissed, and that she could not and would not utter this.

As evening fell over Aztlan, Atlanta descended from her father's fortress and came once more to my solar observatory, where I sat with the old

mother and, in our board game, had to make my loss seem plausible with more sharpness of mind than if I had won against the beloved woman. That evening I lost for other reasons, because my thoughts were not on the game, and when Atlanta entered, the small board was knocked over. Someone—my mother or I—must have bumped it, and Atlanta, of course, decided in the woman's favor.

My mother, however, honored this exception in a noble child who visits her beloved in the evening and feigned tiredness and went to her bedroom next door—though I do not think she slept.

Never was I so young as on that evening; I was so young that I forgot the concern for the star Heldung-Atlanta, for she sat beside me and, like a kind of double star, crowned my brow. And I confessed to her everything that I had, in former times, called love and needed to confess, but I fear she did not understand me or did not want to, for she only smiled and made no pretense when she replied that she could understand why the women of Atlantis had loved me.

Whence had this child of the distant borderland of Aztlan gained such wisdom of human things? Perhaps the ancient heritage of deep understanding also slumbered in her, that priceless gift given to great souls who cannot judge before they have first tested themselves, to see whether principle and upbringing can withstand the intoxicating powers of great cultural centers.

How wise my Ancient Friend had been in guiding me to spend the last days of my highest happiness in the cold mountain land of Tiahusinju before the turning point came, which would shatter joy and happiness into ruins, and cause such blessings to become veils of sweet memory—for from then on, I would have to fight, with sword and mind, for the survival of my own race. And over our happiness—the greatest that was granted to us—there lay the faintest shadow of pain, a premonition that our joy resembled the flare of a new star, which soon fades into darkness, as if it must avoid letting its radiant pure light become something commonplace. For all that is commonplace lacks the intoxicating fragrance of the marvelous, and to those whom fate favors, it takes away happiness before it becomes routine.

And this feeling, which we both carried unconsciously and hidden in our hearts, created the fine sadness that made this hour so indescribably rich, twining heart and mind with blue, wondrous flowers and whispering mysterious enchantments through the vast halls of the old Kalasasaya. If I had ever known that women possess a deeper primordial knowledge than we do, that at the depths of their souls they carry the wisdom of all the generations the earth has seen for as long as men have lived upon it, I learned it that evening, when the red glow of the blazing volcanoes bled in the far mountains, and Atlanta's mouth rested on mine in the self-forgetting rapture of young love.

But this was the hour the Ancient One gave me as a farewell—not only from Atlanta, but as a farewell from the circle of millennia-old power and glory, from forms that could not rise higher along that path, and from that which, in the blaze of new struggle and new beginnings, was to be transformed.

Atlanta forbade me to accompany her back up to the Akapana fortress, since after this farewell she wished to be alone, and I honored her wish and stayed behind.

But I stood beneath the dark mass of the Sun Gate and watched her as she descended the steps and passed through the side halls of the central chamber and, in the dim light of her star Heldung-Atlanta, walked like a lonely queen through the vastness of a silent, deserted palace—noble and exalted. The narrow east portal swallowed her up, its immense mass of stone covering the beloved as though it were the maw of a terrible beast.

It was not the last time I saw and spoke with Framer's child, for many weeks later love united us again in the turmoil of the earth; but that parting had nevertheless separated our paths. That night I also saw the star Heldung-Atlanta for the last time, for when I saw it again, it had completely changed and was as large as the palm of my hand; nor did it move anymore among the other wanderers on its own orbit around the sun, as it did then, but remained with the earth and became a part of it—and my fate, and that of the golden realm of Atlantis, was fulfilled.

Dark smoke crept in from the west, and I could not tell whether it might be only clouds, which in earlier nights upon the Tiahusinju highlands were as rare as snow in Atlantis. In the smoke or clouds, a red and terrible glow burned from distant mountains, whose flickering pillars of flame ceaselessly and with growing wildness shot up into the sky, and a far-off, muffled sound was carried to me by the wind, as if nightly storms were rumbling in the icy heights of the Lake Andes.

Still the star Atlanta shone near the zenith with a restless, flickering light, but I saw a thin silver haze hovering about the yellowish little disk of the star of fate, which—turned away from the sun—dissolved its sharp rays into the darkness of the heavens. Involuntarily, I thought of comets, and the ray of light that they too, turned away from the sun, breathe into the gardens of the vast spaces, and I hoped, with a last glimmer, that Heldung-Atlanta might be such a harmless comet.

Lurked, I leaned against the parapet of the uppermost gallery and stared into the pale face of the threatening wanderer, but still it was not granted to me to know its secret, no matter how restlessly my mind strove for explanation. With secret dread, I sensed the fate of the earth. For there hovered the terrible star, close behind her on the same orbit, or almost so, creeping with sly and

relentless persistence, as if she could not escape him. And now it seemed to me that the star was drawing on the earth, so that I thought I could hear her groaning and crackling beneath my feet, and a heaving tremor—quite unlike the earthquakes I knew. I heard water trickle and murmur, and I could not tell where the sounds came from that filled me with dread; but when I turned my tormented eyes to the sanctuary below, whose inner basin was connected to the lake of Aztlan and could be fed from it, I saw that at the edges of the basin beneath the enclosing walls the paved floor glimmered.

I was well aware that the level of the holy pond of the Kalasasaya rose or fell with that of the lake, depending on whether rain had been plentiful or scarce, but I had never seen the stone edges of the walled basin exposed—unless the pond had been drained for cleaning and pumped dry. The dark clouds now drew in completely and covered the star Heldung-Atlanta, and I saw it vanish beneath the veil, which henceforth would lie between the lights of heaven and me like a gloomy secret, until the fate of great Atlantis had spoken its last word upon the earth.

A pungent smell of thin volcanic gases came with the cloud, and a night storm moved with flickering flames over the darkened city, so that the solar observatory Kalasasaya echoed with the thunder of heaven. Before the rain set in, I retreated under the halls of the uppermost gallery and listened to the rushing of the celestial waters and shuddered at the tremors of the ancient earth and the uncanny rumbling in the depths, which sounded so utterly different from the thunder above my head.

I stepped into the northern portal of the sun wall and peered into the dark distance, where I knew the lake of Aztlan lay, and with a flash of lightning I saw that the trading galleys, which had arrived yesterday with pilgrims from Tikina, were tilted upon their keels. Tomorrow they were to cross the lake again, to bring more pilgrims who waited on the other side to reach the place of their longing, the holy Aztlan. But now the galleys had so little water that their departure would encounter unforeseen difficulties.

I waited for the harsh light of another lightning flash and peered again out across the lake. And I had not been mistaken: the water had retreated far, and the ships at anchor and apparently those in the harbors as well were firmly grounded. Even my own ship—a small, slender row-galley with a mast, which I sometimes used to travel to my country estate of Apacheta on the northern shore of the great lake, whether for hunting or to take restorative refuge amid the magnificent wild Andean mountains—had tipped onto its side at its mooring. I noticed this quickly, as I knew exactly where my galley was berthed.

Now it was clear to me why the surface of the holy pond in the Kalasasaya had fallen. So I woke the serving priests who lived, like myself, within the ring of the temple, and instructed them to close the outlets of the pond to prevent the water from falling further. For the pilgrims from all over the

world, who would gather in a few days to celebrate the solstice festival, would need to have the opportunity to sprinkle their children with the pond's water or to bathe in it.

Since the time of the great festival was pressing, I sent a messenger to Ruder Atakama—not without a pang of regret, knowing he was newly married—and had him awakened and brought over, so that he could have the suction pumps operated to refill the half-emptied pond. These pumps drew their water from the deep moat of Akapana, where there was always sufficient water available, even when the lake stood at its lowest.

A strange, lively scene of busy work involving more than a hundred men—initially quite groggy with sleep—filled the rest of this peculiar night. My old mother, consequently, was quite restless and lost her sleep, which I would so gladly have granted her. And with amused smiles I occasionally saw the white garments of the young girls of the Kalasasaya flit behind shadowy doorways and windows, for their curiosity, too, would not let them sleep, eager as they were to see what was going on within the temple ring, which was otherwise so quiet at night.

In this way, by chance awake in the heart of the old sanctuary, I was able to take care of several things that would ease the flow of the coming festival, and Ruder Atakama, despite everything, maintained a cheerful expression, since his work the next day would have been twice as hard had I not woken him.

To console him for his trouble, I invited him into my quarters for a warm morning drink, for the nights in Aztlan, especially toward dawn, are bitterly cold, even if it rarely freezes. But he did not stay long with me and hurried home before daybreak to his young wife, so that she would not worry about his long absence. This made me smile a little as well, for in former days the master builder of Aztlan was always the last to leave the merry drinking, a trait he shared with every builder I've ever met—for Ruder could drink the wines of Atlantis and Gondwana in the most generous quantities. Even I, who was no foe to the sweet grape, could not always keep pace with him. But this morning, I had to return the jug of hot wine to my mother half-full for safekeeping, for it was clear that a beautiful young wife is evidently a better drink than even the finest outpouring of Atlantean sun-juice.

As the first light of day shimmered through the gloomy, racing clouds, the prince of Acora had me summoned to Akapana, and with a pained smile I fastened my new diamond clasp—which was now worn under the breastplate of the black scholar's robe in place of the previously prescribed twelve pearls—and set off, determined not to miss the appointed hour.

The unsightly but fortunately lightweight metal cap I also had to put on—much as I disliked wearing it—but it had the advantage, in terms of vanity, that the bridge guards of Akapana Castle were required to show me the honors otherwise reserved only for high commanders of the imperial army. Since the guard detachments had known me for two years and I them, they grinned with a fatherly grimace during their martial display—performed with drawn swords for my sake—and thus tempered the dignity of the whole affair to a level befitting our long friendship. I thanked them with solemn gravity and a raised hand for their efforts, little suspecting that the men were rendering my metal cap its final honor.

On the fortress bridge, I saw how low the water stood, and a quick glance at the lead-colored lake—its boundaries vanishing into the misty, rainy distance—told me that there must be something special about the water's great retreat. Not quite knowing why, I attributed the cause to the new star Heldung-Atlanta, and I still believe today that its power—unknown to me in cause and extent—must have displaced the waters of the lake. Only years later, when I was living in Nordland on Framer's estate and saw how the moon Heldung-Atlanta made the sea rise and fall with a mysterious, but undeniably real, force, did the solution to the riddle of the lake at Aztlan come to me. Its surface resembled that of a small sea, such as I had seen beyond the Pillars of Heaven's Bearer, in the Mediterranean, when I traveled to Egypt.

Given the shallow shores of our lake of Aztlan, even the smallest shift in the water level would become visible, especially at the first onset of the unknown force, which in any case produced significant differences in balance compared to previous conditions. Of course, I do not know for certain if my explanation is correct, although it seems plausible to me, even if I cannot prove it.

The Acora awaited me in the royal residence, which served as a home for the families of the lords of the realm of Atlantis and was accordingly sumptuously furnished. As simply as Lord Framer of Akapana kept his own quarters, so lavishly had he outfitted the royal residence during his tenure as governor. The refined taste of Ruder Atakama had fortunately supported him in this, so that the noble metals—of which the realm, and especially the borderland of Tiahusinju, possessed an abundance—were not misused by ostentatious excess. By contrast, the amount of gemstones and pearls—which can be concentrated on small surfaces, leaving larger ones free—could truly be called immense. I myself had never been able to make peace with the Atlantean custom of displaying wealth in an exaggerated manner, and my intimate knowledge of the noble construction of ancient Aztlan, built by the ancestors before the flood, had, I believe, shaped my taste for the better. Of course, I was not overwhelmed by the splendor I now entered, since my home city of Atlantis had made me used to such things, but after two years in the borderland, it did bring a smile to my face.

Even so, I understood Lord Framer well. His passionate desire to demonstrate the greatness and power of the fatherland, even by external means, to those who, as envoys or guests, entered the royal residence, led him to do more here than might perhaps appeal to a highly developed sense of taste.

When the dark-skinned servant from the land of Zimbabuye—a hideous fellow of incredible height—had led me into the antechamber, wearing an expression as if he were lord of the Atlantean world, a nobleman from the Acora's retinue took charge of me and, without ceremony, opened the door to the prince's study.

The Lord of Acora was sitting with Framer of Akapana at a wide silver table, both upon chairs of pure gold, and at the narrow end stood another identical chair for me, so that I soon had the chance to find out that these chairs were actually very comfortable. The prince nodded to me and invited me to take a seat.

That Lord Framer was to be present at the audience for which I had been summoned filled me with unease and a dull sense of foreboding—not because I feared the governor, but because I worried about possible difficulties for Atlanta. How right I was in this, I would soon enough discover. At first, I doubted my prince, to whom I had given heart and mind since I had looked into his understanding eyes in Framer's hall. How wrong I was to distrust his chivalry and humanity, I would only learn afterward.

Framer's magnificent Northland head, with the furrowed features of a man whose life had not been easy, sat firmly on his broad neck, and his translucent eyes, with a sharp little ring at their center, pierced my skull from my eyes to the copper backplate of my ridiculous cap. And despite my somewhat irreverent description of his gaze, you may believe me when I say I loved this man just as he was, and perhaps all the more because he was Atlanta's father. The Old One had not cut me from too feeble a wood, and had given me the ability to subdue men with my eyes if necessary. For this too is an art one can only imperfectly learn if one does not possess it innately. So it happened that I played the same game with my sharp eyes as Lord Framer, and we stared at each other, neither looking away, until the spectacle began to tickle me and laughter rose in my heart and disarmed me; but—and let it be said right away—it also disarmed the old lord, for he too struggled not to laugh.

But the Acora laid his hand over his eyes and lowered his narrow face deep onto the golden table—such as we use to deposit valuable documents—and thus concealed his amusement, which nevertheless did not escape me. So I could not be dissatisfied with the introduction, for in a matter that seemed grave, a joyful inner laughter—the best gift of the Old Master—served as mediator between a princely duke, an offended father, and a lovesick sinner in a tin hat.

“I have, in the name of the king, elevated the governor of Tiahusinju, Framer of Akapana, to the rank of imperial count,” the prince finally declared.

I knew that such an elevation was a rare event, for the title and dignity of an imperial count of Atlantis had not, as far as I knew, been granted in a generation. As best I could recall, the person who wished to receive this honor had to have saved the royal house not only from great danger, but from likely destruction. Among my own ancestors there had been such a count, and it is shameful that I can no longer remember why he received it.

I looked expectantly at the Acora and, since he remained silent, asked if I might offer Lord Framer my respectful congratulations. The duke raised his hand in refusal and declared in a serious voice that the imperial count had requested permission to decline the honor.

This announcement took me quite by surprise and left me rather disconcerted. Framer’s refusal was—yes, I must call it so—an affront to the sacred person of the king, of the most egregious kind. I was so shocked I could not say a word; nor was it necessary, especially since the prince had not commanded my opinion. Instead, the Acora asked me if I knew who was to blame for the refusal.

Of course, I did not know, though I told myself it must be Lord Framer himself.

"You," said the duke, and fell silent.

If one has grown up in courtly circles—and scholars of my family’s rank all do—one acquires a certain indifference toward high lords and is not so easily thrown off balance. But here, there was only one thing I could do befitting the situation: I stood up, unbuckled the golden dagger from my belt beneath my scholar’s robe, and laid it before the Lord of Acora on the table. Then, in as calm a voice as I could manage, I requested my arrest and the honor of knightly imprisonment.

"Keep your dagger, Godda Apacheta, and sit down," the prince continued. Then he cast a quick glance at the imperial count’s grim face and said that, if he were to proceed with the arrest, he would also have to have Atlanta Framer taken into custody, for she was even more at fault.

In a flash, it dawned on me. The Acora had, in bestowing the new title of imperial count upon Lord Framer, asked for Atlanta’s hand—and had been refused! What must that refusal have cost the old governor of Tiahusinju!

I would not wish the infinite agony of the situation I found myself in on any enemy of mine. Did this prince not know how matters stood between Atlanta and me? How was it possible, then, that he had nevertheless sought her hand?

The golden ceiling of the hall began slowly to spin; I was so disconcerted that I could barely keep my hands still upon the table. With horror, I realized that now the noose was tightening around my neck. For now came the question—the dreadful question...

And then I heard the voice of the Acora, as if from far away, saying he could not appear before his royal father with the imperial count's refusal, neither regarding Atlanta nor regarding the conferral of the title upon Framer. Lord Framer of Akapana had replied positively to the confidential inquiry from Atlantis, and so he, the duke, would in any case try to persuade the governor to accept the title after all. Surely, I understood this predicament—as he assumed I did, and how very well I did! He did not speak of the law that statecraft creates, for he too wished for the right of a man when it came to love. Would I be willing to give up?

"No," I said. An ancient defiance, dormant in my northern blood as I had never known until this day, glowed in my heart like a smoldering fire that would burn even underwater.

And with that, I was calm again. The golden ceiling ceased its spinning, and as my vision cleared, I saw the embittered features of Lord Framer of Akapana, saw how he rested his old, gray head in his hand for a short moment, but soon regained his composure and calmly placed his hands on the polished surface of the table. I must confess, I suddenly admired the controlled manner in which this dreadful affair was being conducted, though the disappointment over the Acora still remained in my heart, like a poisoned dart.

Icy silence froze endless beats of time in the pearl-glimmering room—at least, it seemed unbearably long to me—and it was so quiet that I could count my calm heartbeats and hear the deep, heavy breaths of the old imperial count from his broad chest.

The duke looked at his slender hands, as if searching in the blue translucent veins for the way that would now lead him to the conclusion. It was like a release when the Acora finally, in a soft, almost indifferent voice, put the question to me whether I had received Lord Framer of Akapana's consent for marriage with his daughter Atlanta. I was able to declare that the imperial count had already made the decision without my asking, namely, that he intended to give the answer to my yet unasked question only after two years had passed, and that Atlanta, during this time, should go to the royal court or wherever the king might choose to send her.

Here I noticed a hint of restrained amusement flicker across the prince's serious, noble features, and I must admit, this impression wounded me not a little. I was in no mood for laughter at that moment, no matter how much I might otherwise appreciate all the pleasant and comic things that stubbornly cling to human affairs—and matters of love are certainly no exception to this, if anything, quite the opposite.

"Atlanta Framer has informed me that she hopes, through the king's favor and the intercession of the Prioress of Acora, to be assigned as a lady to the state observatory on that same mountain. I can assure you even now that no such intercession will be needed. Atlanta Framer's wish will be granted."

Here, for the first time in today's discussion, I was met full on and clear by the prince's compelling gaze, and I trembled for my steadfastness, which I owed to Atlanta.

"Since you will not pose the question to the imperial count for two years, Godda Apacheta, it is not an unreasonable request that the prince should compete with the scholar for the crown of women," the Acora continued. "Do not forget what it means, Apacheta, that the duke of the realm makes such a plea. In matters of love, I do not command, but I do wish to fight for my love, just as you and every knight would. I offer Framer's daughter a loving heart and the crown of the world. She shall choose after the period her father has set has passed."

My defiance collapsed within me; only the pain remained, like a burning sting in my heart, that I had lost Atlanta if the game were to be played this way.

I gave in.

But immediately, I made the request that I might petition the king for my release from state service as star-watcher of the Kalasasaya observatory, so I could withdraw to country life. This was clear enough.

"As the king's representative in the borderland of Tiahusinju Highlands, I release you from your office, Godda Apacheta," replied the Lord of Acora, without hesitation.

And before I could take the opportunity to ask for leave to go, the duke turned to Lord Framer and, with a kindly smile—against which even the hard old man had no defense—handed him the golden certificate that contained his appointment to the highest honor the realm could bestow.

"My Imperial Count Framer," he said as he rose, and of course we two defeated men followed his example. "I wish to see your report, with all the insignia of your dignity, here in my study in an hour. I have had the chain and diadem delivered to your esteemed wife, Dana Framer, by a knight of my retinue. I ask you to receive your king's congratulations through my mouth—through the mouth which, as you wish and hope, and as is my highest wish, may soon be able to call you father."

I saw that Framer nearly staggered and left the room with his golden certificate. And again I tried to open my mouth to request leave from this terrible, splendid, misfortune-laden chamber—but things turned out differently.

"What do you think of the Acora?" the duke suddenly asked, quite out of nowhere, and his laughter struck me in the face, all at once and painfully.

I did not think I had deserved to be laughed at on top of everything else. Accordingly, I refrained from answering and asked to be allowed to leave.

Then the Duke stood before me, upright in the full manly slenderness of his royal presence. He looked at me for a while with a half-smile, then became serious and reached for my hand, which I allowed him, even though I would have liked to pull it back.

"I have released you from the King's service at your request, Godda Apacheta," he began, with his captivating voice, which he knew so well himself that he could always rely on its effect. "Now I ask you to be a friend to poor Acora."

A boundless bitterness swelled in my heart.

"I was mistaken, Lord Duke," I replied, without friendliness and with the humility owed to the heir to the throne, but I said it as firmly as I felt necessary, so that he would have no doubt what I unfortunately thought of him.

"You were mistaken, Apacheta?—In whom? In Acora?" he asked softly and slowly, as I had expected, for this man could read thoughts, as I liked in exceptional people.

"Yes, in you, Lord Duke," I replied.

The prince sat down at the table and supported his head in his hand, perhaps to hide his features. "Yes, Apacheta, chivalry failed Acora when he wanted to compete with you for the beloved who had already made her decision, because the power of the Duke reaches far, and his power over women's hearts is said to be great as well. Perhaps I should have acted differently in this case. But I too am in love, Apacheta, not you alone, and Atlanta was promised to me;

Framer wrote to the King that nothing stood in the way of the courtship if I came to the festival and sought Atlanta's hand. And I had believed Atlanta could learn to love me. Don't you think she could, in Atlantis? In the sun observatory of Acora?"

"So long as I live—not, Lord Duke," I burst out, for I believed in Atlanta, who was a knight of the heart as I myself hoped to be.

"So long as you live, Apacheta," the prince repeated thoughtfully. "That is a long time, and gives Acora little hope. Do you think it possible that Atlanta could love me, if you were no longer here?"

I replied that I did not know.

Slowly the duke stood up and approached me.

"Godda Apacheta. So long as you live, Acora will not seek Atlanta Framer's hand," he said slowly and with emphasis. "So long as you live, Apacheta—understand me well. See to it that your life is long, and when I look at you, I must fear that Acora's hopes of winning the queen, whom the star-wise man of Aztlan contests, are slim. I think that is enough. And…"—a smile flashed and faded about his mouth like a dazzling ray in the diamond of his diadem—"And I have defeated Lord Framer. Sometimes the course of a game must unfold this way, in order to save a man like Lord of Akapana from the deserved disgrace of the king. As punishment, Acora has had to bear for a short time the curse of unchivalrous behavior toward Godda Apacheta and Atlanta Framer. I have borne it willingly. You may go now."

This time, I truly do not know how I made it down the steep stairs of the fortress, which even with alert senses must be descended with care, but I was lucky and found myself on the bridge of Akapana before I realized I had not said a single word of regret to the prince, telling him I was sorry for having wounded him in my heart. But now it was too late. Tomorrow I intended to travel to my country estate at Apacheta, for I was free and relieved of all honors and offices. All I needed was to notify Master Gülham and inform him of my resignation.

With a certain satisfaction, I threw the tin hat into a corner of my room, so that my mother became annoyed at the undignified treatment I accorded such a fine piece. And, repentant, I picked the hat up again and laid it in its case of Zipangu silk. I never had occasion to bring it out again, and whoever finds it under the mud of the lake may keep it. It is light and never weighed on me much.

The next day, as my servants were busy packing my clothes and hunting weapons, and my mother, full of grief over the Duke's displeasure—who had now also issued my dismissal from the imperial service in writing, so

briefly and without a word of praise—was taking care of all the little things I, as an unmarried man, was wont to forget, the Count Framer announced himself.

I had to try to conceal my inner cheerfulness behind a serious, almost plaintive expression. I knew, after all, that the Lord of Akapana, because of the Duke's displeasure—which had become very clear through my dismissal and Atlanta's as well—had spent a restless night. Despite his hardness and ambition, there lived an honorable heart in the old man's chest, which was now deeply troubled on my account. And he spoke more with my mother than with me, for mothers always feel the injuries done to their sons more keenly than the sons themselves, especially when those sons have not actually been wronged, but cannot admit it.

Thus I learned that the count had asked the Duke to reverse my dismissal, but had no success, since the Duke believed he had merely granted my request and did not force any official to remain in royal service if he himself did not wish it.

I had to laugh inwardly at this crafty diplomat Acora, and when Lord Framer bowed his proud spirit and—still half turned toward my mother—expressed his regret about how things had turned out, and his appreciation for my work at the Kalasasaya solar observatory, I even felt a bit guilty, for in truth it was the count who had been caught off guard, not I. In place of the fine diamond buckle of my official garb, which I had returned to Master Gülham, he presented me with a sword with a precious belt, which had once belonged to the former Inga of Cuzco. His intention to make up for the slight I had suffered was unmistakable, as it surely was not easy for him to part with this war trophy, which had come into his possession in a hard-fought battle for his borderland Aztlan.

Three days before the solstice festival, I had my galley dragged by several hundred Zipangu people into the navigable channel of the harbor, with its strong keel scraping through the mud where it had been stranded ever since the lake's waters had receded so far that large stretches of shore now lay dry. In the drizzling rain of an unkind sky, I set a course for my estate at Apacheta, at the northern end of the mighty lake.

The previous night, a strong earthquake had shaken the old solar observatory, but caused no damage; however, on the fortress I saw Ruder Atakama's workers rushing back and forth, though I could not learn whether serious damage had been done to the count's mighty castle. Presumably that was not the case, but only some damage had occurred to the great drainage system, which had once collapsed twenty years before.

Like an arrow, my slender galley shot northward. I stood at the stern, pressing the heavy tiller lever against my body, with the inner joy of a Nordic

sailor, whose blood had slumbered within me for thousands of years. Twenty long oars dipped in rhythm to the ship's drum into the leaden waves of the lake, which rocked the galley in its arms with long swells, like a man in a tender mood rocks his beloved.

Dense, threatening clouds of smoke enveloped the volcano Kjappia, which thus remained hidden from human eyes, and over the Andes by the lake it hung black and eerie, like ominously clenched fists. I must admit that my unease had somewhat subsided since that night when I last saw the new star Heldung-Atlanta. Perhaps it was also the disappearance of the star behind the veil of clouds that lulled me into a sense of security. The worry over the harmful effect of the returning wanderer lacked any purely scientific basis, and we star-wise men were still very far from understanding such effects. Ever since I had observed that Heldung-Atlanta looked like a hairy star, with a nebulous shroud and the beginning of a tail, I no longer fully believed in the danger. For the harmlessness of these heavenly wanderers with their radiant silver tails was well known to me as a stargazer. Besides, I had perhaps become a bit more carefree since the tin hat no longer adorned my head, and I thought with gratitude of the Acora, who had relieved me of it. As long as I lived, the duke would not court my Atlanta! A happy laugh flashed through my heart, along with an infinite affection for my princely friend. I was determined to live at least another two years, for it was only a matter of those two years—not any longer. Then I could ask the poor outmaneuvered Count Framer to give me his child, who had rejected the crown of the world for my sake.

The galley glided past black cliffs in a dreamlike flight, past islands whose towering peaks were lost in drifting clouds, and I saw the lance-straight white bands of limestone running just above the lake's surface across the dark stone—the bands that the Ancient Friend of the universe had drawn upon them when he once sent the great flood over the earth. There, where those bright, broad bands, razor-sharp to the eye despite their actual width, cut across the rocks, the water of the world-sea had once stood, before Aztlan, the Ancient, was submerged in the waves. So the tradition tells it, which we preserved word for word and passed down from generation to generation, so that the tale of the great flood should never fade.

Up at my country estate Apacheta, at the northern end of the lake, these white bands lay twice as high in the mountains, and I had often wondered why the Ancient had drawn them at a slant and not straight, when today's lake runs perfectly level.

But I know my friend! In all things, he loved to speak to his friends in riddles, and I believe he delights, in the manner of mischievous people, when humans rack their brains, collect all sorts of explanations, and call the whole thing a scientific result—unshakably correct, and beyond dispute. The Old One has teased me often enough, and I have become cautious, suspecting a lovable

trap behind everything he shows me—one into which I try to refuse him the pleasure of seeing me fall as often as possible. That he still often manages to lead me astray with a skill that clearly reveals the enjoyment he takes in it, I have naturally also had to experience. But then I put on a good face for a bad game and laugh with him, for laughter disarms even the Ancient One, since he created the earth green and lush, not dried out and gray.

So we have gotten along well so far, and if he may have helped me a little with my unpleasant affair with Atlanta and the Acora, I shall try to repay his kindness at some opportunity. I only fear that he will not set much store by such repayment, for as little as he holds a grudge, just as little does he care about thanks and recognition. This, at least, I can now write in the stars, since I am no longer a servant of the Kalasasaya, but a free man, just as the Ancient Friend out there is.

Since the wind was singing splendidly through the rigging and was also blowing somewhat favorably from the west, I ordered the sails to be set and granted the galley rowers their well-earned rest.

I love the cold, whistling wind of the mountain heights, and when I can harness it so that it presses my galley into the foaming waves and works for me—better than twenty rowers ever could—I feel a little bit like the Ancient One, as master over nature, even if this mastery is only tiny and can sometimes even turn into its opposite, namely when the mastered nature breaks free and turns the spear against me.

As the lake widened and land and water blended together into a haze-shrouded expanse so that only the leaden-gray color of this mighty remnant of a salt sea could be seen, a great fleet of Atlantean warships came toward me on a counter course. At first, I took them for a number of pilgrim ships traveling together to Aztlan, but I soon recognized my mistake. On the flagship fluttered the green flag of the Inga of Cuzco, the previously unconquered enemy, and the following ships of Framer had set over the red-and-white banner of the borderland Tiahusinju the same green colors as the Inga, while the blue of the Realm of Atlantis flew from all galleys at the stern.

It was a splendid sight, how the reconciled imperial enemy was heading for the holy city of Aztlan, and I let my black-and-white banner dip three times in salute. And, quickly deciding—as the Ancient One once again teased me—I hoisted my green hunting shirt above my house banner on the mast. This went off without much trouble, since the short sleeves allowed me to tie the ropes; thus this barely official piece of clothing ended up in a place which, with my body, only shared the distant similarity of being reasonably straight.

The jubilant cheers that resounded from the Inga's galley toward me showed that, from a certain distance, the world is always what it is, and that all

imperfections merge together in the smallest of spaces, so that the overall picture suffers no blemish.

The encounter was soon over, for the warships shot through the waves like dark arrows, despite the strong wind that was less favorable for them than for me, but Framer's galley rowers were men with arms of bronze, and drove their ships forward with every stroke, as can only happen under the strictest discipline. And Framer saw to this well.

Thus, behind my stern, the might and splendor of the last Atlantean war fleet on the lake of Aztlan sank below the horizon, and before me lay gray mist and heavy clouds.

It must have been the inner happiness over the splendid noblewoman Atlanta Framer and over the now no less beloved Acora, that kept the unaccustomed gloomy sky, the threatening fires in the Andes, and even the severe earthquake of the past night from filling me with worry. If anything, the opposite was true, and I believe my Nordic blood, with its inherited joy in mysterious distant horizons, and my heightened sense of happiness as an ordinary sailor at the helm of my galley, must have been responsible for this. That was the great advantage of the borderland of Tiahusinju Highlands, that in its domain the mighty lake stretched its body far across the high plateau, and that the native urge for travel into the wide reaches of the beautiful earth could at least be simulated here. For we northern Atlanteans are, to a man, a seafaring people, as it could not be otherwise if one wishes to win the world with sword and intellect. No matter how large our islands in the Atlantic Sea are, they have never seemed far enough for us, to satisfy the craving that wondrously anchors at the bottom of our souls: to wrest from the Ancient One mastery over the green earth. And success was always the second thing that drew us into the distance. The first was always this: to seek new land, new land for the hungry sword and for the thirsty soul, to laugh at danger—although the fear of men dwells in our hearts as it does in all, given as a laughable part of human nature. Yet the Ancient One gave us danger as a lodestone for the yearning soul, to plunge in, precisely because overcoming fear is a glorious reward, even in defeat and death. This is the glory and nobility of my ancient people, and this inheritance shall remain as long as Northmen strive around the globe of the green earth.

Remember this, stranger, you who draw these words down from the shimmering bridge of the white celestial road to your people—this story of the downfall of great Atlantis: how my soul flew like a flashing lance toward the highest mountains when the fate of the star Heldung-Atlanta shattered my homeland. Lay your hand on the last helm of the last ship, and you will snatch command from the Ancient One’s grasp.

Be sure—he will laugh with joy that you do.

As the wind swelled into a storm, I had two reef rows set in the large sail to relieve the starboard side of the galley from the water pressure, and altered our course by a small angle further before the wind, so the high waves could no longer strike the ship's hull from the side. In this way, we had a smooth ride and great speed, especially since the galley had been built at the best shipyard of Aztlan as a swift-sailer, cutting the waves with its high, narrow bow like a sharp sword. This, my last voyage to Apacheta, was the peak of intoxicating exultation at life, and I have not forgotten that the Ancient One gave it to me as a farewell from Atlantis, the proud realm of my fathers.

Floating on the waves—at first singly, then in ever denser clusters—came a strange yellow layer, and I recognized it as foamy lava and fused ash that came from volcanoes, but possibly also from those that lie beneath the skin of the water, deep on the lake's bottom, strange as it may sound. I had often seen such fire-vents under the water of the world's oceans during my journeys over the Atlantic, and they always revealed themselves as floating masses of variously colored, lightweight stones.

And as we continued onward, in a plunging flight that made the lava crunch along the hull of my galley, we encountered shipwreck debris here and there, protruding and bobbing lazily in the high waves. These must have been the remains of pilgrim ships, which, on the very day the Prince of Acora arrived in Aztlan and was forced to take an involuntary bath in the floodwave, were destroyed by the fury of a submarine volcanic eruption. My Zipangu galley rowers had anxious eyes, which made me laugh, and even the ship's master, an Atlantean, looked at me in surprise that I could laugh at the threatening signs of such disaster.

The men probably thought me heartless, and I cannot help it if they did. But they didn't understand my laughter, even though I tried to explain it to them.

When night fell, the ship's master wanted to relieve me at the helm, since I had been pressing the heavy tiller against my hips since early morning, absorbing the force of the high waves rolling in from behind, trying to spin the ship. I had eaten only a little bread and wine at mealtimes, and the man thought I must now be hungry and at least tired. That I was not, however, may seem remarkable, but the euphoria of overflowing happiness in life gives more physical strength than any calculation can measure, which judges only the consumption of strength and demands its replacement. Still, I stayed at the helm through the night and sent the men, save for a single cabin boy, to their quarters. And it wasn't as dark that night as I had feared, because the volcanoes in the lake Andes burned like blazing torches, dyeing each rolling wave red. Even the sails, which I had reduced to the last reef row, glowed fiery red. And when I looked down at my hand gripping the tiller, the diamonds on my rings sparkled like the eyes of a predatory beast.

Nevertheless, I laughed into the night like a mischievous demon and sang into the storm, which howled with cold rain and sleet around my neck, so that the words of my old sailor's song flew into the flame-red waves. And since a few of these words drifted into the crack of the almost-closed cabin hatch, I occasionally saw a sleepy head poke out from the open hatch and gaze in wonder at the starwise Godda Apacheta, whom these people had always considered to have a little defect in the brain.

I wondered how short this night was, even though it certainly had no different measures of time than any other night on the highlands. Lead-gray and foaming, the lake of Aztlan churned in the gloomy dawn, and far in the distance, the mountains emerged from the flood, blurred in the mist of the drizzle. These were the mountain ranges of the crossing Andes, which formed the actual natural border with the realm of Cuzco and were only difficult to cross. Today, this chain was sparsely populated, and only a few castles from both realms stood at the passes. Earlier, there must have been a time when this was different, for the mountains were terraced with farmland up to their peaks, in thousands of horizontal thin lines layered on each other, so that from a distance, the range looked as though a giant had stretched a net of horizontal ropes over it. These fields are abandoned today except for the few we have put back into cultivation, particularly at my estate, Apacheta. The works of unknown ancestors allowed me to harvest good crops, something otherwise impossible on the steep slopes due to the washing rains.

The mountains became clearer and rose up out of the flood of the lake, and there, where an uncertain green shimmered on the slope, lay Apacheta, my country estate. By midday, I steered the galley with oar power into the small harbor that Ruder Atakama's builders had constructed for me out of stone. The steward stood on the pier and caught the line, and his bright-eyed girls offered me freshly picked flowers, as if I had been announced in advance. I accepted them, one after another, by the head—there were four, each prettier than the last—and kissed them, to their astonishment, on their fresh red lips; the last, who was seventeen and not the least pretty, seemed to think this must be the custom in Aztlan and offered her little mouth so that in this final case I had not the slightest trouble.

Thus, I had something more to confess to Atlanta later, so she wouldn't think me too well-behaved a man, though my conscience was not burdened by this "sin." And when one has steered day and night, such a fresh drink from four different chalices doesn't taste bad. Since the steward's wife also came over, I drank from the fifth chalice too, though I didn't quite manage it, as the steward was present, and his wife turned her mouth away to avoid any trouble.

The laughter that sounded here on the pier may well have been the last that rang so completely from carefree hearts, and my high spirits proved contagious. The joy was already great enough that the lonely estate of Apacheta,

after so long, once again received a visit from its master, who here was never an astronomer, or royal official, or anything else official, but a child of the green earth like all the others, and a well-liked friend of the Ancient One, a happy and spirited companion to the girls and boys, and a simple hunter.

I left the care of the galley to the ship's master and went to sleep in my house on the estate. I did not hear the storm whistling around the wooden roof boards, nor did I know of the heavy thunderstorm that passed over us, nor did I hear the roar of the waterfall that fell beside the house from the mountains. I slept like a happy child, and only Atlanta glimmered through my deep sleep like a loving star. Forgive me for reporting such things about myself, which have no connection to the story of the downfall of great Atlantis, but I wrote them by accident into the stars and cannot now retrieve them. And whoever finds them in a later age, when Godda Apacheta has become a legend, may tell them as they wish, or leave them unsaid.

Nor do I wish to tell of the quiet days I spent in the lonely mountain heights, among clouds and wind, among animals and people—days that were peaceful despite the roaring forces of nature in the land of the ice-capped mountain giants. Often the ground would shake beneath my feet when the Underworld beings shook the earth, and rockfalls would break loose from high cliffs and tumble into the valley, sending snow spraying from steep walls into the gloomy air and their rumble echoing dully through the gorges.

High up among the mountains lay abysmally deep lakes of sweet water, fed by the snowy heads of the Andes and as clear as crystal plates, such as we used in Atlantis and Aztlan for the ends of window openings. I wandered with bow and quiver from lake to lake, climbed up trickling and falling streams to find the next one, which dreamed between sky-high cliffs. The day of the solstice had long passed, but I had barely thought of it, except for the steward's family's decision to forgo attending the first service in Aztlan, which reminded me that the Kalasasaya still existed. A deep contentment slumbered in my breast, that I could wander here in my Apacheta mountains while some other colleague carried the heavy, gold-adorned sun through the corridors, a duty that would have been mine if Acora had not released me.

At times, in my mind's eye, I saw the hundreds of thousands, even millions of believers, who filled the flagstones of the solar observatory and the wide spaces around it; I saw Gülham, the old man, spreading his arms and heard his loud voice as he spoke the sun greeting toward the east, where the daystar stepped behind the veils of cloud at the northern pillar of the Kalasasaya at the turning. I saw flower-bearing young girls before the mighty wall of the sun, in which the ancient gate sat with its mysterious signs, and heard the humming of voices uttering prayers and the tone of the golden basin marking the start of the procession.

Wrapped in a leather cloak, I sat by the high mountain lake of Apacheta, watching the spindle of my fishing line trembling over the mirrored surface in the breath of the wind, and nestled into the hollow of a gnarled mountain tree, for there I was warm and sheltered against the whistling wind blowing from the snow slopes.

And just as I was about to close my eyes in happiness and solitude, the earth jolted violently upward, so that I nearly fell into the lake, had not the clutching bark of the hollow tree saved me from an icy bath. With the thunderous echo of a deep rumbling fading far beneath the rocks on which I sat, I hastily scrambled away from the lake's edge and upwards, for the once-still water had become quite wild and was suddenly crashing against the shore in heavy waves.

I don't know how many times those hard shocks repeated, but I felt truly miserable, as if I were on my first voyage over stormy seas, and I sensed an unmanly fear and terrible dread creeping up my back—like two odd brothers who had conspired against Godda Apacheta to drive the big talk of Atlantean heroism out of him. But a glance at the lake made me forget my fear for my own small life, for I saw the quiet water had begun to move and quite visibly seemed to flow.

At once I hurried to the outflow of the lake, to investigate what was going on, for the outflow fed the small waterfall that flowed by my house and estate with a bright rush into Lake Aztlan.

And at the spot where previously only a little water would flow down, a deep fissure had opened in the rocky ground—a crack that the earthquake had split open—and a mighty, foaming torrent thundered wildly over boulders and cliffs. Stones danced down the slope in the whirlpool, showing a liveliness I'd never suspected in them, and from the crack that had formed in the former boundary of the lake, white foam shot out like churning milk.

I immediately realized that not all was lost, if the steward, his wives, and the other inhabitants of the estate fled in time—and they had to have soon heard the unfamiliar roar with which the great masses of water rushed downwards. Driven by fear that the fissure might widen further with the next quake and drain the freshwater lake all at once, I ran down the rough path like a youth, but the narrow road was almost everywhere flooded, and I had to climb back up the slopes to find another path. This cost me precious time, and it seemed an eternity before, from the top of a steep scree cone, I could see the estate of Apacheta.

The water had been swifter than the sluggish star-wise of Aztlan, and the milky foam was now surging right past the low house. And there, where the

gentle green slope teemed with grazing vicuñas, the steward's people were running up the mountain to save themselves from disaster.

The sailors and my Atlantean ship's captain had also immediately recognized the danger, which was all too clear as it raged into the waters of the lake beside the harbor. Since the galley, with its sails struck, lay at the pier and could not be launched to escape the destructive force of the rushing water on the open lake, the men acted rightly in abandoning the vessel at once and running after the steward's people.

They acted just in time, for I heard an immense crashing roar thunder through the gorge behind me. From my perch atop the scree slope, I witnessed the terrifying spectacle as nearly the entire mass of my, admittedly small but very deep, Lake Apacheta surged down to the valley like a steep wall of water, mud, and rolling boulders, the echo reverberating from the Andes like the bellowing of enraged demons.

I was still far from the estate and harbor, and so I could observe, almost as a bystander, how a high and wide blanket seemed to slowly and deliberately spread over the house and farmstead, pushing onward to the harbor—not hastily at all, though the actual speed of the cascading masses must have been tremendous. Then, a small peninsula of water, debris, and mud built itself out into the gray lake; the galley tipped a little to one side and disappeared beneath the covering, the piers collapsed and vanished without resistance beneath the rolling, wet wall. When this work of destruction was complete, I saw a flood wave slowly and majestically travel in a circle across the wide surface, further and further, like a faint dark streak stretching into the distance, as if a playful gust of wind chased after it.

In stunned, deep amazement, I lingered on the mountain slope, gazing with wide eyes at this never-before-seen sight that knocked so insistently at my soul. Like a flashing lightning bolt, I saw fate flicker in the distant haze and mist; I clearly felt the magical ring, choking tighter and tighter around the rich Atlantis, like a dreadful serpent coiling the giant body around the neck of its helpless victim.

Then I knew that my days of happiness were numbered, and that now the struggle for the salvation of the Atlantean soul was beginning, since the empire itself would no longer be saved! The hammer of fate had fallen!

With slow steps, I descended to the valley and called to the steward and the sailors, who stood helplessly on the hillside, staring at the disaster with burning, wild eyes. And they were astonished that I was laughing again, rather than looking, as they did, in dismay at the misfortune that the cruel earthquake had brought upon my beautiful estate, Apacheta.

The first thing we did was count the people, and to my joy, not a single one was missing. Still, the situation was far from pleasant, as we had lost nothing less than everything. The small consolation that I still had a bow and a quiver full of arrows to hunt game was of very little comfort.

Nonetheless, we immediately got to work and tried, in some way, to reach the buried house. One servant had saved a spade—though certainly not by design, but because he happened to be working in the garden when the initially harmless stream from the mountains arrived. He had simply kept the spade in his hand and run up the slope. Unfortunately, we soon had to realize that all efforts were in vain, as the mud layer was too thick, and at the harbor—rather, at the place where the harbor had been—the scene was even more desolate, for now, a veritable peninsula of debris stretched a mountain-high tongue out into Lake Tiahnsinju.

So, we had to resolve to set out along the lakeshore to the nearest settlement, the border town of Apacheta, which, with its fortress, was not far from my estate and which the king had given me as a fief when he assigned me to the border province. So, there could be no question of a truly desperate situation, assuming the little town had not suffered in a similar way from the earthquake as my country estate. And when I cheerfully and casually suggested we set off for the walk without delay, the ship's captain spotted, far off in the mist and rain, a galley emerging, slowly growing larger and proving to be a warship belonging to Lord Framer of Akapana.

Naturally, under these circumstances, we abandoned our planned walk.

And after only a few hours, I held in my hand a small letter from the Prince of Acora, made of wild leather, bound with gold thread, and sealed with wax.

I withdrew to one side and opened the letter. It was very brief and read: "The Acora awaits his friend."

THE GRINDING WHEEL

It is difficult to describe the effect that the changes I found in the conditions of Aztlan had on me.

The earthquake had raged through the old sacred city in a truly horrifying way; it resembled an enormous heap of rubble, and I would never have thought such destruction possible. True, the gigantic public buildings outwardly appeared almost untouched, yet massive cracks ran through their walls—walls that had seemed built for eternity, and now had almost failed. Vast sections of the new constructions—those built by the Ruler Atakama in the City of the Dead, the town hall, and the harbor district, as well as in the new complexes of the Kalasasaya—had collapsed. Still, the devastation there was minor compared to what I saw in the endless rows of the residential city, where the buildings were less robustly made and, in part, still constructed from clay. Here, hardly one stone stood atop another.

The wide ring of the five harbor facilities possessed by Aztlan had virtually disappeared, and, as if in mockery, the ancient stone harbor works of our ancestors from the flood era still stood on higher ground, completely intact. They had successfully resisted collapse because their internal interlocking bound them into unified, rigid masses that only failed where the building material itself fractured.

Entire fleets of pilgrim ships lay smashed on the shore, deep in the mud. The count's galleys had sunk, and it seemed as though the only warship left undamaged was the one the duke had sent to Apacheta to fetch me. In the following days, several undamaged ships did arrive—ones that had not suffered out at sea—but the bulk of the royal sea power on the waters of the Tiahusinju highlands had vanished. And over the entire calamity, rain and fine white ash from the fiery mountains of the Sea Andes drifted down.

A vast migration of pilgrims had begun, but it did not get underway—primarily because the ships that had brought them to Aztlan were now missing, for traffic in the highlands had, since time immemorial, taken place mainly on water. So it was simply impossible to get the masses across the lake, even if there had not been such a sudden influx. Many families, understandably having lost all sense, crowded along the land route to the narrow strait of the Aztlan peninsula, seeking to pass between our fortified barriers and reach the open highlands. Framer's knights and men-at-arms tried in vain to bring some order to the withdrawal of the countless thousands. But there were too few guards, and between the fortifications, total confusion reigned, leading finally to a complete blockage. To clear it, force had to be used against the refugees; in short, it was a dismal sight.

Moreover, the main strength of Framer's forces was needed within the city itself, where unrest had broken out among the Zipangu people. Presumably, the questionable festival guests from Cuzco had seized the opportunity to stir up the populace; of course, the reasons for this were not easy to determine amid the general chaos, as fear and despair readily turned into senseless rage, and no special provocation for unlawful acts was even required.

The solar observatory of Kalasasaya, after the earthquake, was left—though only for a short time—at the mercy of shadowy marauders, and the ancient sacred site resounded for almost an entire night with the clash of vengeful Atlantean swords. My old mother, however, was safe and sound with Dana Framer on the Akapana. At the onset of the earthquake, as I had advised her before my departure to Apacheta, she had fled to the fortress because my dwelling threatened to collapse. Master Gülham, the temple servants and priests, the young maidens, and the astronomy students had all found refuge in Akapana as well, so I walked through abandoned halls when I now visited the site of my two-year service as state astronomer.

My residence had been looted, the precious furnishings smashed, and in my study lay the corpses of slain looters. Fortunately, I found my black scholar's cloak again; its low value—since all the pearls were missing—must not have tempted the thieves, and I put it on, grateful that at least the cloak had remained for me.

The Sun Gate had toppled over and lay flat upon its raft, where it still stood, having broken through the covering of wooden planks, and now floated again on the canal that Ruler Atakama had dug, as if it wished to return on its own to the workshop to await completion there. I do not believe the figures of the gate were ever finished.

I did not find the prince at the fortress; it was said he was in the town hall, holding a summary court with Lord Framer and the legal scholars of Aztlan. So, after a brief greeting to my mother, I turned once again to the steep staircase to descend. There I saw Atlanta Framer standing on the flat roof of the Framer house. She waved to me but vehemently waved me off when I wanted to turn back to greet her.

She was probably right. The Acora had summoned me, so I had to see him first, and according to the arrangements with Lord Framer, a visit to Atlanta was not appropriate at this time.

With heavy lashes of the whip, the bridge guards had to clear the way for me, for it was crowded with grumbling and cursing Zipangus. I had a whip handed to me and thought I would make it through. I did not actually need to use it, for the disturbed masses of people probably had no intention of hindering me, but I felt reassured to have the whip in hand.

Despite the great confusion prevailing in the city, human curiosity seemed to demand its due, for it was said that, in the open hall of the town hall, the looters were being executed who had seized the opportunity of the disaster to search the rubble of the houses for valuables and to rob the dead and wounded of their jewelry. For this reason, a large crowd had gathered near the town hall, who, though unable to witness the retribution, were waiting for news from the hall.

At the entrance to the town hall, I threw aside the whip. There it teemed with Atlantean warriors of every rank. The great ring of the venerable building was surrounded by men bristling with weapons, and far and wide the helmets of the mounted nobles gleamed. Several hundreds had just arrived from the nearby fortresses of the region. Framer had brought in parts of the nonessential garrisons to combat the uprising, and the military discipline of the count's troops was running with the precision of the sun, which never lags behind.

On presenting the royal seal on Acopa's letter, I quickly passed through the double cordons of guards, who stood with drawn swords on the colorful staircase, its steps made of alternating bright, rare stones.

The duke was holding court.

I do not believe that Count Framer's legal scholars had much chance to speak—the situation was too serious for that, and it is possible that among the two hundred heads that rolled here across the dark, rough lava tiles, there may have been that of an innocent, or even several. But the issue was to restrain the erupting rage of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, and so the heads of all those who had raised their hands against the officials of the count, or who had been caught looting, fell. Framer was not the kind of man, nor was the Acora, to try to remedy a desperate situation with weakness. What happened here, without many questions and answers, was simply necessary.

Before I could report to the duke, I had the dubious pleasure of witnessing these executions, and I was glad to see that even Acora's face bore the same expression of inner disgust that I felt at the sight of the bloody spectacle. Framer's hard features were unmoved. He knew his frontier. Here the Atlantean fist had to show that its bearer was lord of the earth, and not the yellow Zipangus or criminal rabble from all the world.

Among the executed were also two nobles of the Inga of Cuzco. They had admitted to inciting the people to loot, having been betrayed by their own men. They met their fate like men.

The Inga himself had disappeared, and of course it was difficult to find him among the masses that Aztlan harbored during the festival of the solstice.

Whether he was complicit in the uprising was uncertain, but likely. The temptation must have been great, for among a thousand festival participants, there were at most ten Atlanteans, and the opportunity was too good for the energetic enemy not to seize it.

It was completely clear to me that the appearance of the ruler of Cuzco at the religious festivals in Aztlan did not mean an end to the dormant enmity. A calamity like that which had befallen the borderland of Tiahusinju—and to such a degree as had happened here—must have provided strong incentive for the ambitious Inga to shake off the hated oppression of the Atlantean count. The sudden outbreak of revolt, whose scope could not be explained solely by the actions of criminal men, meant for Framer the resumption of war in the borderland, which had so long enjoyed the peace—the peace which Atlantean statesmanship had used to promote the prosperity of the harsh, yet infinitely resource-rich country.

And if one considers that, in the domain of the Atlantean governor, literally lost golden valuables would lie untouched in the streets, and that losing such objects almost never meant a permanent loss, then the looting that set in after the earthquake was a sign that far more was at play than just minor unrest. Thus, the ruthless crackdown that took place here—to my slight human satisfaction—was well placed, and it did not fail to have effect. In just a few days, the count was able to have the reinforcements he had called in withdraw to the home fortresses, and the patrols that had marched armed through the streets and alleys of the ruined city could be stood down.

Finally, after I had to witness the spectacle of the last execution, I was able to report to the duke. He ascended with me the few steps to Kalasasaya, whose enclosure lay in deep solitude, as if there were not, outside, the surging mass of frightened pilgrims and the armed companies of Count Framer.

As we wandered through the deserted halls, Acora spoke, with that quiet, clear voice whose music caressed the ear, of his anxious concern for the fate of his homeland—the Atlantean islands in the eastern sea, between the two continents of Tiahusinju and Zimbabuye. I had the impression that he knew exactly how things stood there, although no news had arrived that could have given cause for concern. Still, it was hardly possible that such news could have arrived already, even with good courier connections.

Once again I recognized the astonishing magical kinship between Acora's soul and my own, a kinship that fused us together, whether we wanted it or not. He spoke to me as if I knew his thoughts, even though I had never heard them before; with perfect naturalness, he spoke of our journey together to Atlantis, so that I did not even need to ask why he wanted to take me with him. The short letter he had sent me at Apacheta was explanation enough: "Acora awaits his friend."

I also did not hope for any appointment or promotion, nor did I wait for any explanation as to what capacity I should travel with him, for the appointment had already happened: I was to go with him simply as a friend.

He wanted only to have me by his side—he, who had thousands upon thousands of friends, friends who surely had not caused him the pain I had, when I refused to release Atlanta Framer to him. I had seen clearly how his heart and soul blazed when he spoke with her in the hall of Akapana. It does not take years to succumb to my beloved wife; I too had been struck as if by lightning the first time I had the chance to speak with her alone.

And yet the Acora had overcome himself and called me his friend. As long as I lived, he would not think of Atlanta, certainly would not court her. That, for him, meant renouncing her altogether, for I was younger than the duke, and healthy and strong. This man knew all this and yet forced his chivalrous heart!

"You have now become thoroughly poor, Godda Apacheta," said the prince. "But the Acora is still rich enough to give his friend whatever he needs. Up in the fortress, I have had your mother provided with everything you require for your journey to Atlantis, and I must now simply ask whether you wish to come with me, since I cannot order you about much anymore. After all, you are a free bird and can do as you please."

Of course, this was not meant seriously, and he smiled as he said it.

"You may also ride beside Atlanta's palanquin, lucky man of the stars," he continued. "But let us only do that when the old count can no longer see, or he would take Acora for even more cunning than he already does. For I know that I have bestowed upon Lord Framer's heart more wealth with the count's title than I have upon you with your freedom. But as consolation, you have given me your love, and in return for mine, you have taken the queen from me. When I think of the future, Godda Apacheta, it now seems to me as if it is no longer about queens and about love, which stirs up such unrest in our hearts, but about things that weigh heavily upon us, like the stone beams of this Kalasasaya upon the mighty pillars of a bygone age, now become legend. — Soon, Atlantis too will be a legend."

The words of my friend sounded dark in my ears—words heavy with fate, words I had often thought myself when, on dark nights, my eyes sought out the star Heldung-Atlanta. Yet this man's voice betrayed nothing of despair or dull resignation. And I saw him upon the open sea at the steering post of the rudder, standing like a strong pillar, unmoving and with uplifted gaze—but the image flashed by so quickly I could scarcely see it, and I thought my own

voyage across the lake of Tiahusinju had given me this reversed reflection, that I believed I saw my friend at the stern of the galley instead of myself.

"My blood draws me north, Godda Apacheta," I heard the Acora's soft voice say with a joyful shudder.

"Do not laugh at me, you who are of my kind, and if you should not understand me this one time, I will be content, for I cannot demand everything."

I replied that I would relieve him at the helm if he grew tired from the force of the waves, and as I said this, the prince wept and embraced me.

As we continued walking side by side, through the deserted halls where the corpses of the slain stared heavenward with pale eyes, Count Framer approached and reported to Acora that the Inga of Cuzco had attacked the fortified outposts of the Aztlan peninsula but had been utterly defeated.

The Zipangu hordes, however, had withdrawn after this failed assault.

The proud, powerful eyes of the Lord of Akapana gleamed with untamable resolve at this news, and it was obvious, even without a word from him, that the Inga would no longer sit securely in his strong Cuzco.

"I will send you five armies from Atlantis, returned from the borderlands of Egypt and now quartered in the soldiers' barracks on the islands, awaiting new wars," said Acora. "You have pleaded long enough, Count Framer, for the chance to properly thrash the Inga. Now I finally have the necessary military force at my disposal. When I arrived, Cuzco seemed willing to submit peacefully—now it is not so, and you shall extend the frontier of the Tiahusinju Highlands northward as far as you are able."

I saw a tremor of deep joy flicker across the stern features of the old warlord, and the will within him seemed to harden him into a block of iron. Yet he did not suspect what stirred in the prince's soul: that it was not the pursuit of ever-greater power that was to raise Atlantis to new heights, but that a final will to life must stand at the helm to carry the Atlantean spirit northward—back to where it was born, before the golden castles rose on the islands of the Atlantic sea.

But I understood my friend. No despair was to enter the summit-high thoughts of a perfected Atlantis. Whatever might come—growth or decline—it was all the same. Radiantly should the spear of the noble soul strike toward the highest peaks, unwavering toward the sun whose children we were, to overcome the Ancients and to compel fate itself with an unbroken will toward life and new greatness. And even if millennia passed away, the song of the Northmen would

not fade, the song of the struggle for the noble soul, which wrests the sword of destiny from the hand of the friend in the universe.

The prince discussed his departure calmly. He measured the time by when the promised armies should arrive, ordered the necessary thousands of Zipangu porters and animals to be ready at the Atlantic coast at a certain date to carry the equipment and weapons to Aztlan, without which no war against the Inga could be waged. And the count assured him that the porters would be on the coast at the appointed time; he would coordinate with the governor of the lowlands to prevent any delay. I listened in wonder as the plans took shape before my eyes, forming into clear results, so that I was almost seized by a firm confidence that the fate of the new star Heldung-Atlanta would once again pass over us and grant the realm of Atlantis another span of growing power and greatness.

Such is the effect of the displayed confidence of a great leader, as Acora was, that the shattered city of Aztlan rose again before my soul; the wide lake teemed with colorful pennants of swift ships, and on the thousands of terraces of the mountain fields the plow of the diligent Zipangus conjured our daily bread from the stony earth. I saw northern banners flying on the walls of Inga's city Cuzco, shimmering armies of Atlantean men marching northward and to the great sea, which points westward to the motherland Zipangu, and royal war fleets darted like arrows across the waves of the infinite watery desert of the Pacific, to win the last realms of the earth for the blue sun-banner of golden Atlantis.

Even over the city of Aztlan there lay something like a new hope. The paralyzing horror created by the earthquake's destruction had lasted only briefly. Atakama's builders were clearing up in Kalasasaya and providing work for thousands of pilgrims who had so far idly awaited a chance to return home. Ruthless energy rose against disaster, cranes and construction machines rolled in, and from the workshops the strike of chisels and the dull tone of axes rang out once more.

In the fortress, the contests for the king's and Acora's prizes continued, and the religious festivals in the numerous sanctuaries of great Aztlan drew believers and onlookers into the wide, solemn gardens of the city of the dead. Where the earthquakes had torn wounds too great in the walls, garlands of flowers provided a friendly deception. So hope for better days shimmered once again around the battlements of soaring Akapana, as Acora, with his retinue of a few knights and servants, rode southward.

The usual crossing of the lake, which greatly shortened the journey, was forgone, since the count needed the few ships that had survived undamaged to patrol the lake against the Inga's flatboats, and the remaining galleys, not too badly damaged, were still on the shipyards to be repaired one after another.

Lord Framer had made good preparations for the journey. The royal post stations along the highway to the Tiahusinju lowlands were stocked with horses and select provisions, as well as ample supplies to house the royal entourage in tents, should the individual post houses prove insufficient. The routes through the gorges at Illimani were to be avoided because of the danger of falling rocks; here the frequent earthquakes of recent times had served as warning enough.

In the lowlands themselves, the local governor was to ensure the undisturbed continuation of our journey, which would proceed along the great Silver River to the sea, and from there on a war galley to the islands of the kingdom.

I took leave of my old mother, who was again living in my quarters at Kalasasaya, and I was deeply moved, for the looming fate of the star Heldung-Atlanta cast a shadow over my soul. I advised her that, at the slightest sign of a severe earthquake, she should immediately leave the solar observatory and flee to Lady Dana on the Akapana, since the fortress buildings would withstand any shock. In any case, it was thanks to this advice that I did not lose the kind lady in the terror of the following weeks and was able to see her again—and that she was one of the few people whom the Ancient Friend left to me. For when I returned, what Acora and I had foreseen with the magical power of a dull premonition had come to pass. The twilight of the kingdom of Atlantis and its thousand-year-old nobility had begun and swiftly come to completion. With mighty blows, the Ancient broke apart what he had built over the long, arduous labor of an age of the world, to create space and strength for the new rise of his friends from the distant Northland.

Dana Framer took my head between her delicate hands and kissed me like a mother, and the gray count stood undecided before me for a moment, as if he wanted to draw me to his broad chest, to ask forgiveness for pain he had not caused me; but he only shook my hand and asked me to send greetings home and not to forget Aztlan. That was all, but I knew the lord of Akapana and understood that these few words, despite everything that had happened, were full of love.

Without office or rank, I rode away with the son of the king, and none of us knew that in a few days he would be the last king ever to wear the crown in Atlantis. And the hundreds of thousands still crowding on the peninsula of Aztlan—because some of the refugees, filled with regret, were returning, blocking the road between the fortresses twice over—cheered for Acora as we slowly made our way through the throngs.

But I did possess an office and a dignity, even if no pearls or diamond clasp adorned my black scholar’s cloak: I rode as a friend with my friend.

And I have kept faith with Acora, and Acora with me, even when the Ancient shattered my last hope and scourged my love with a nailed whip. Yet, even in the final temptation, he could not bring down our souls. He had to leave us the gleaming lance, to hurl it against the sun, high above, and he could not conquer the soul of noble Atlantis!

I do believe that this gave him joy.

As confidant of Acora, I rode along, and as a simple star-watcher and scholar, and I wore no armor beneath my cloak and carried no sword—only the golden dagger I once offered to the duke, so he might have me arrested. Even the precious sword of the Inga, which Lord Framer had once given me, was lost. The looters in Kalasasaya likely did not even know what weapon they were stealing when they found it in my abandoned quarters.

Sometimes I rode beside Atlanta's palanquin, which was warmly roofed and enclosed with transparent panes of white mountain glass, to guard against the cold of the highlands that swept over the slopes at night with whistling winds. The palanquin held room for two people: one seat was Atlanta's, the other was occupied by her blonde young maid.

And one evening, before the halt, before the fires were even lit, and the darkness favored things that concerned no one except those who loved each other, two arms reached out of the window for me, pulled my head close, and my heart exulted with happiness.

I must have looked very distracted when I sat later at supper with my friend, for Acora smiled and said softly, "That's how men look who have kissed a woman—lost in the flames."

It was hard for me to remain silent at that, and I would have liked to throw something at Acora for his devilish talent for reading me like an open book. For it was hardly possible that he could have actually observed me.

On Framer's advice, our journey this time did not follow the fortified military road through the deep-cut gorges at Illimani, that familiar giant of rock, to the lowlands, because the earthquakes had hurled down massive rocks and made the route too dangerous.

So we traveled in the thin, breathless air along the slope of that ancient block of primordial stone, and on the fifth night after leaving Aztlan, we camped at a small sanctuary that dreamed here in distant, quiet heights, managed by a few Atlantean astronomers of lower rank and inhabited by several families of a native tribe whom we called Arowacks.

Since we had notified them, finding accommodation was not particularly difficult. The astronomers of the sanctuary had provided food and drink, as well as a ceremonial welcome for the king's son from Atlantis—a greeting which Acora accepted with that winning friendliness that was characteristic of him, and his joy was so genuine and undisguised that the priests gained the proud conviction that they had performed their duties excellently.

Fortunately, the prince's riders declined to stay in the covered hall assigned to them, since the stone slabs paving it were much colder than the grassy area in the middle of the temple courtyard, and because the campfires in the open air needed no supervision, unlike those that would have burned in the timber-roofed hall.

Only Acora and I sat in a covered room, and Atlanta slept with her young blonde maid in the stone grotto of the mountain god, which was roofed by a natural arch of rock. If Acora and I had not spent so long that night in intimate conversation by the little fire, things might have gone badly for us.

For just as we were about to go to rest and stepped outside once more to look at the sleepers by the fire, the earth cracked open with a deafening bang, so that we rolled over the grass like helpless bundles of cloth.

I cannot remember what happened next, for I was tossed to and fro, hurled about by the force of blows more violent than I had ever known or imagined, and it was as if the massive block of Illimani was about to collapse on us.

With a tremendous roar, boulders everywhere broke loose from the mountains and crashed down into the valleys, and even at the mountain sanctuary some of these masses of debris must have passed close by, for a harsh, smoky draft of shattered stone blew through the halls. And in the next moment these halls, too, were no longer standing on their foundations, but collapsed with a crashing clatter and the splintering of beams.

What had never happened to me at sea—and what I always laughed about when it happened to other unfortunate souls—now happened to me: after a short while I had to vomit violently, and Acora later admitted to me that it was no different for him.

That my first thought—once I could form any thought at all—was of Atlanta, will surely be believed; stumbling over stones and falling debris, I found myself with the prince almost at the same time in the vaulted hall of the mountain god. It had remained undamaged, but the walls and vaults rocked under the never-ending shocks and crashing waves like the living quarters of a rudderless galley in a storm.

Acora wanted to rush to his beloved and carry her out into the open in his arms, but then something astounding happened—a display of self-mastery by a noble, great soul! In the middle of his run, the duke stopped; I sensed it more than saw it, for the flames of the campfires cast only uncertain, flickering light into the grotto. Acora staggered back and seized my arm.

"You!" he said loudly, as if to master the thunderous, storm-like noises in the depths of Illimani.

So it was I who carried Atlanta to safety, for even the cave had partially collapsed by the next morning; at least, some heavy stones lay on the floor that had broken loose from the rock ceiling.

With my arms I embraced the beloved, noble woman, and I noticed how Acora wrapped his cloak around her back, for Atlanta was in a light nightgown, and her neck and nape shimmered in the flickering red of the rekindled campfires in the temple courtyard.

When the prince appeared behind me with the soft blankets and cushions that had served Atlanta as a warm bed, and from the jumble of Zipangu silk and Atlantean linen the blonde head of her maid poked out, the Ancient played a prank on me; I had to burst out laughing despite the dreadful situation, and Acora laughed too, for he—the rich duke—was playing the servant to a servant, and he tried to threaten me with his hand, although he could hardly move it under the soft burden of the young lady and the double bedding.

This laughter, ringing out merrily amidst the crashing of the earthquakes, surprised the horrified knights of the retinue not a little, for their laughter had long since died away—indeed, perhaps had never come, unless it had just occurred in their dreams.

Beyond the fortunately still burning fires, the night was filled with demonic darkness, and only the voices of unleashed subterranean forces and powers proclaimed the enormity of what was happening not only in Tiausinju, but—as we later saw—across the whole earth. Unceasingly, I heard the rumble of crashing torrents of falling debris rushing down the valleys, and out of the black night the tormented earth groaned like a wounded animal. From the black depths, where I knew the small but abyssal Lake Hanko lay—on whose far shore stood the town of the same name—a roaring surge swelled to our ears and faded into the distance, not to repeat itself. What it meant, we only learned the next day, when we discovered that the lake had drained away into the lowlands.

Our attempts to free the priests who were trapped beneath the rubble of their cells had to be abandoned at first, as more and more sections of the not very sturdily built temple crashed down in ruins. Still, in this first attempt we at least managed to rescue two wounded men, though both died later that night.

It was only because Acora and I had not been under the hall's roof when the earthquake began that none of our small party was harmed. There was nothing we could do but lie on the ground and endure the unprecedented convulsions of the trembling earth beneath us. And since, despite the heavy clouds, it did not rain that night, we could see a terrible, glowing flame-light flare up, casting the jagged peaks of the royal Andes into stark black silhouettes. As I considered the direction in the sky, it soon became clear to me that this must be the glow of fire from the throats of the Burning Mountains in the Sea Andes, which, despite the vast distance of many days' journey, blazed across to us with eerie brightness.

Now and then, the fury of the forces below seemed to subside, only to surge back with double intensity. And amid all the terror, I felt Atlanta grasp my hand, pressing her pale face against it, and then lie quietly on the cushions, wrapped in the duke's cloak. I saw her body sway back and forth with the earth's tremors, but she did not let go of my hand, and despite the horror of the moment, I would have been a fool to withdraw it from her.

From time to time I looked at Acora, whose composed and steady features were illuminated by the campfire's glow. With grave, silent eyes he gazed at the glowing sky above the Andes, then slowly raised them to the black heavens, as if seeking the star Heldung-Atlanta, which traveled its unknown path behind a gloomy veil. Yet no human eye could pierce the shroud that lay between us and our grim fate. And still, we both knew—Acora as well as I—that the downfall of the kingdom of Atlantis had come.

I cannot describe how oppressive our situation was. Will and determination were powerless, for we had to lie on the ground and be grateful not to roll into the campfires. Any thought of a heroic deed was out of the question. Helpless, we let ourselves be shaken by the maddened earth. And to this was added, in the early hours, a violent thunderstorm without any rain, and the uproar reached its peak. In our tormented ears there was only a continuous din of thunder and crashing, and no one could distinguish whether the sound came from the heavens or the depths of the hard rocks.

When daylight appeared, dull and gloomy over the royal Andes, we were all astonished that Illimani still stood in its old place and that the ice-covered mountains had not all tumbled down atop one another.

The deep gorge through which the highway ran—built at unspeakable difficulty by our Atlantean road engineers—was now smoking from the dust of landslides that had broken loose from the walls of the mountains, and the lake around which the road had wound, and along which we had ridden only the day before, was gone. Without a doubt, the earthquake had opened new outlets to the south and drained all its waters into the Atlantean lowlands. We had distinctly

heard the rush of the outflowing waters during the night. And with that, it was certain that the majority of the post houses along the highway were lost as well.

Beyond the former lake, a steep slope now rose up, almost vertically, like a skeleton of clay and gravel. And up on the edge we saw the little town of Hanko, inhabited by native Arowaks and a few Atlanteans. From such a distance, little sign of destruction could be seen, and only the stirring movements of unfortunate people revealed to us that, over there, life had not entirely perished in that dreadful night.

By midday, the tremors had noticeably subsided, so that we were at least able to rise from the ground.

It felt like a miracle!

Nothing had happened to our small party. Only a few pieces of the duke's luggage lay shattered under the collapsed roofs of the halls. Yet we managed to retrieve and repack even these, so that, considering the events of the night, we could still count ourselves fortunate—especially when we thought of how things must have gone for others. And Aztlan?

Worry for the count's beautiful city, and for the hundreds of thousands who had come from all over the world to the festival at Kalasasaya, suddenly weighed heavily on my heart.

Yet I was able to overcome such worries in the next hours, as I could practice my medical skill on the wounded priests and Arowaks, and I thought of how many people around the world now had to endure without help and without the relief of coca or opium. In this sense, these wounded were still better off than many others.

Fortunately, the duke's personal physician had sufficient quantities of soothing remedies in his herb pouch, so that our combined efforts met with success.

I was so absorbed in my work that I hardly turned around when I heard a loud cry behind me. After such a dreadful night, I thought, nothing could happen that would be more unbearable, and I continued bandaging and cutting, engrossed in a task that, at least, produced visible results.

And yet, I was grateful to Acora when he touched my shoulder and led me to the sunken portal of the sanctuary.

My friend silently pointed northwest, where, from our elevated position halfway up the towering ice giant Illimani, the view reached far across the highlands of Tiahusinju—across the uniquely immense plateau, which Lake

Aztlan had dominated like an absolute monarch, conquering the harsh highland air with its endless surface of water, and giving life to those who lived on its shores and drew their sustenance from it.

There, where the view nearly failed in the cloudy distance, a white, almost gray, dense wall stood in the thin cold air, growing with terrifying speed and seeming to roll forward. This wall stretched as far to both sides as the mountains of the royal Andes did not block the view. It appeared to be completely level and bore no peaks, so that it could not be a newly formed mountain range, as I first thought.

Now I almost shouted aloud myself, for I now saw that the giant wall was moving toward us, and that its growth was not proceeding from the bottom upward, but rather was caused by the shortening of the line of sight—the wall was racing toward Illimani with dreadful speed. The whitish-gray color of the advancing mass first made me think of dust, rolling in on the wind, but the prince whispered softly in my ear: “The lake!”

These few words brought back to my mind an image I had once seen from the rubble cone high above my country estate, Apacheta, when my little freshwater lake—where I used to fish—rolled over house and farm, over harbor and galley. Back then, it had moved without any particular hurry, and seemed to flow quite slowly and confidently into the broad expanse of Lake Aztlan. I watched that gray-white band, like a little wall, glide playfully over the wide plain and then vanish far off into the mist.

But here, the gray-white wall emerged from the distant mist and rolled toward us, ponderous and self-assured like the other—but it was clear there was no escape from its speed, and that its path meant death for anyone who crossed it. Today, though, the quantities of water involved were on a completely different scale than back at Apacheta. And as I stared at this monster rushing toward us with storm-like speed, I saw all the many great freshwater lakes high in the mountains of the intersecting Andes and the Sea Andes burst through their barriers, hurled down by the terrible quake of the previous night, and roll over the lake of Tiahusinju. And the fire-mountains on its bed hurled off their crushing masses of water, causing the broad surface to surge, and with twice the fury and height the watery wall rushed south. With choking horror, I watched the flood wave—like a mountain of water and mud—roar over the hundreds of thousands in Aztlan who had been jolted from sleep when the earthquake struck. On and on, farther south, I saw the destruction racing, leaving the drowned city behind, and now I stood again atop the icy giant Illimani. But the wave came ever closer across the highlands from the misty distance, with relentless force.

Hand in hand, I stood with Atlanta by the collapsed portal; on her other side stood the prince, and nearby were knights and warriors, either standing on

the ruined wall or sitting in the grass, all their dark eyes turned toward the catastrophe.

I do not know why we did not try to climb higher onto the mass of Illimani—I think we were simply transfixed and unable to move. In silence, we watched the flood wave approach and swell, as though it had nothing to do with us. Perhaps, too, we unconsciously sensed that it would not reach us, since the vast, emptied valley of Lake Hanko lay deep at our feet, and that the terrible wave must, inevitably, plunge into that yawning abyss as soon as it reached the steep slope where the little town stood, perched atop the plateau of the high plain.

We saw the unfortunate people over there running about in confusion, though at such a distance we could see only tiny moving marks, but it was terrible to have to watch such disaster, unable to lift a hand to help. Inevitably, in just a few moments, the fate of the little town of Hanko and its tormented inhabitants would be sealed, and so it was, though in a different manner than we expected.

Meanwhile, the gray-white wall had grown ominously, and now advanced faster than I thought possible. In apparent height, it had long since overtopped the distant mountains of the Sea Andes and blocked every distant view across the highlands of Tiahusinju. Beneath the foaming crest of the monstrous wave appeared a bluish shimmer, and it was now unmistakable that these truly were immense masses of water sweeping over the plain. Yet at the base the wave appeared gray, and on its crest it sparkled snow-white with milky foam. From time to time the crest would spill over, turning vast areas of the front face a bright white, and as it swept over hills and mountains or ran through gullies and cuts in the land, the deep gray color, churned by the earth, rose almost up to the white-foaming crest.

And now a dull, thunderous roar sounded, at first very faint, but quickly swelling, from afar. The echo of the mountains caught it and multiplied the sound into a storm-like howling, the like of which I had never heard in my life. That is why it is hard to describe the sound of the dreadful wave, for no known noise can convey the reality, and there is no possible comparison.

Now the fate of the little town of Hanko had to be quickly sealed. It was obvious—just a few more heartbeats and the giant wave, in a tremendous rush, would reach the edge of the gorge.

But then something very marvelous happened.

Just before the wave reached the town, a massive slab of solid earth broke away from the edge of the gorge under the mounting pressure of the giant wave, and slid slowly down into the emptied basin of the lake, without breaking

up itself—except perhaps along its edges—and the entire little town slid down with it and, moments later, stood unscathed five hundred feet lower than before, roughly in the upper third of the gorge, but still close to the new cliff. In fact, I had the impression that even the remains of the clay huts of the natives did not completely collapse, but stayed upright, because the descent of the town had happened without any tilting at all.

Meanwhile, the roar of the wave swelled into the demonic bellow of unleashed nature, and despite my inner terror, the thought flashed through me that the Ancient One must take wild delight in playing the destroyer this way. Suddenly, the flood wave reared up against the granite mountains of the royal Andes above the valley and bulged sideways over the slopes, pushing sliding masses of mud and debris in incredible layers around the old stone cones, mountains of whitish clay against mountains of primeval rock!

But over the slope of Hanko the wave thundered out into empty space, into the void, the bottomless, and it seemed for a moment to lose direction and control, for it hung there in the air with a dented surface, as if unsure what to do next, now that the ground had suddenly vanished from under it. But the hesitation of the watery beast did not last long. With a deafening crash, the mountain-high wall, spreading out wide, plunged more than a thousand feet straight down—a depth even its massive bulk could not master. Then we could see little more, for from the gorge a completely dense mass of watery vapor rose into the sky, high above the tallest peaks of the mountains opposite, and with such speed that the earlier advance of the watery wall across the plateau seemed a mere crawl in comparison.

Suddenly, an impenetrable twilight lay before our eyes, and only because we could still clearly see the forecourt of the sanctuary up to the cliff's edge did we know that the vapor of the waterfall had not yet reached us.

But we did not have long to wait. With devilish speed, the spray shot up from the Hanko valley on this side of Illimani, hurling shattered, cold, wet mist high over us and enveloping us, so that it became almost dark night around us.

I felt Atlanta's head on my shoulder and wrapped my arms around her. I gave up any further observation, as it could lead to nothing now that the darkness, with its cold, wet veils, encircled us. Instead, I tried to make out Atlanta's features, to look once more into her fateful star-like eyes, after which I had named the new star Heldung with the epithet Atlanta. I could see it in her—for I could still make out that much in the gray gloom—that she was resolved to die calmly and with dignity, if the Ancient One had decided it, not just for us, but for proud Atlantis and the noble kingdom on the green, wide earth.

I admit that I did not want to die and hoped that my calculation would prove correct—that the wave would not be able to reach our lofty position on the Illimani.

And soon, comforting daylight shimmered once more through the damp night. The stormy wind, which in the Andes never fully dies down, swept the water vapor before it and carried it away to the east. It grew ever brighter in the precipitous depths of the former Lake Hanko; shreds of mist darted quickly past us, and then the valley opened wide before our searching gaze.

It is hard to describe the amazement that seized me at the sight of this entirely new landscape. It was as if the Ancient One had transported me, without my moving my feet, to another, strange spot on the earth—one of uncanny magnificence in color and form of all its features.

The Andes mountains, as far as the eye could reach, were fundamentally changed. True, I could still make out the original skeleton of the mountain land, for everywhere the peaks of the ice giants thrust their primeval rock skyward as they had before. The rockfalls that had crashed down during the earthquake the previous night had not changed the look of the original Andes, but now a second mountain range had been heaped around the first, a range that, in my conviction, could not be washed away by floods in thousands upon thousands of years—a range of white clay, intermixed with red hills and crags, with gravel and pebble banks of enormous extent, and with flowing and sliding slopes of thick, viscous mud. The wave had obviously not had an easy time making its way through the narrow passages between the ice giants at Illimani and had left behind all it could not carry on its wild rush into the depths of the Atlantean lowlands: the unimaginable masses of debris and mud that it carried in its furious whirl when it struck the first buttresses of the royal Andes.

The basin of the old lake was half filled with this mud and rocky wreckage, so that the abyss seemed to have closed before our very eyes. For this, the clay mountains had piled up almost to our lofty position along the steep walls of the granite peak of Illimani, and with an inner shudder I became aware of the immense danger we had faced when the sea of mud, in the darkness of the watery mist, had surged against our high-lying fortress.

Still, water poured from the wet mountains, rushing noisily down into the valley, following its merciless mother, which now continued its relentless course along one of the most beautiful and best highways of the realm, to lose itself in the lowlands in the river country of the Silver Land.

As I let my eyes wander to the opposite slope, where I was sure the city of Hanko had now been destroyed, I could hardly trust my keen vision—vision that had never failed me in my survey of the Ancient One’s starry sky.

There below, in the very place where the houses of the little community had stood after their plunge into the depths, there was once again a small town with collapsed houses. Or could it be the same town?

Acora, too, had discovered the miracle and pointed it out. The miracle was real. The old town stood in the same spot to which it had slid down the slope, before the wave had thundered over the edge of the abyss. And just as one can walk under a great waterfall without drowning or even getting wet, and just as the watery curtain of the fall, transparent and clear like a glass wall, arches over the path, so the vast arching crest of the raging flood wave must have leaped over the little community, as if such an insignificant thing was not even worth destroying.

Despite renewed earthquakes, no one from our traveling party—not even the unflappable soldiers—could tear themselves away from the immense spectacle. The joy at our rescue from this horrific danger was so great that it burst forth in loud cries and excited pointing, as everyone discovered a new scene so fundamentally different from what had been before, that some clasped their heads and wondered how such a thing could even be possible on earth!

With the onset of darkness, the tremors increased again, though they never reached the terror of the previous night.

At least I was able to continue helping the many wounded, carrying on my work with the support of the prince's physician late into the night.

We covered the dead with stones, since we had neither the tools to bury them nor the wood to burn them, and we rested, for the second night, by the campfire on the trembling earth. The crash of falling rockslides had become almost a familiar music to us, and we endured the thunder of the forces below, since there was nothing we could do to change our situation.

But the more the agitated soul calmed itself, the more heavily the worry pressed down—what could have happened to Aztlan, the sacred city by the Lake of Tiahusinju? I was personally tormented by thoughts of my old mother, who perhaps now had met her death in Kalasasaya or with Lady Dana on Akapana—indeed, must have!

I shared my terrible fears with Acora, told him of my experiences at Apacheta, and expressed my belief that the barriers of the great freshwater lakes in the north of the highland basin of Tiahusinju had been broken apart in the earthquake, and their floods had swept across the vast plain toward Aztlan, burying it beneath mountain-high waters. And if this happened at night, which was likely, or in the early morning, then hardly anyone among the hundreds of thousands who had pilgrimaged to the holy city could have escaped.

"And Akapana?" the prince asked quietly.

"Akapana too," I replied, "as high as the fortress towers above the city, would have been buried beneath the wave," I answered with full conviction. Acora nodded. He too knew, as well as I, how certain this conclusion was. The disaster that had befallen the borderland of Tiahusinju knew no bounds. Only the few castles and estates of the Fandes, or the small towns that were scattered as mining communities at even greater elevations than the city of Aztlan, might possibly have been spared from the flood wave—though the earthquake must have struck them with the same force. All in all, everything Atlantean on the highland had been wiped out, and only a few groups—perhaps ours, or a few others in the mountains—could for the time being be considered saved.

My thoughts flew to Cuzco, the city of the Inga. There was no lake there that could have drowned it. No doubt, it too may have fallen victim to the fury of the earthquakes, but despite many losses, the people must, for the most part, have survived. With a bitter smile, I thought of how the Ancient One had now given rule over the noble borderland to a people like the brown-yellow Zipangus. For it was clear that the meager remnants of those of Atlantean descent would not be able to hold out against the flood of natives for long.

But what might have happened in the motherland, in Atlantis? Both Acora and I harbored a presentiment, bordering on certainty, that disaster and death must also have come to the low islands in the Atlantic Sea, but we did not dare speak of it openly, so as not to dishearten our companions. There was still a faint hope that the return of the star Heldung-Atlanta had not produced the same effects on the islands as it had at its last passage, nearly a human lifetime ago. But after what we had now witnessed on the heights of Tiahusinju and on the slope of Illimani, that hope was very slim.

For this reason, the duke urged that we continue our journey, which was to be made with only a few lords and soldiers from his retinue, and with Atlanta and her maid.

Already on this second evening, I had a premonition that the hour of separation had come.

In the deep of night, Acora fetched me away from the last wounded man we had to tend, and walked with me out of the courtyard of the mountain sanctuary onto the gently sloping hillside, at the foot of which the mountains of mud had come to rest. In front of an abandoned Arowak hut, roofed with reeds and, thanks to its light construction, almost undamaged, Acora stopped and took my hand.

He told me I now had to ride back to Aztlan to see what had happened, if only for the sake of my old mother and Count Framer. I should, however, join

him again as soon as possible, since he did not expect I would find much left to do there. He would send twenty knights and as many men-at-arms with me, in case we encountered rebellious Zipangus, though he thought that was unlikely. He supposed that the pilgrims who had spent the night in tents or small inns on the heights might have been spared by the flood wave and even by the earthquake, although he was certain that the great mass of pilgrims, along with all the city's inhabitants, had perished. And if he did not believe my mother was in Kalasasaya, he would not send me, but someone else. As it was, I would be the one to learn the fate of the beloved woman as quickly as possible.

"And then, my Godda Apacheta," he added with a smile, "hurry to catch up with me again. Waste no time, for there will be nothing left for you to do in Aztlan except to say farewell to the land that brought you Atlanta. If Lord Framer is no longer among the living—which is likely—send this order to all the castles still standing in the land. You can use a trustworthy Zipangu for this, if any still dwell on the mountains above Aztlan. With that, the borderland will be abandoned. You know that the flood wave rolled not only here in the southeast over the highlands, but also southward, where it met no barrier before the Great Sea. And only our highland is inhabited. Thus, Aztlan is erased from the history of the realm of Atlantis."

I asked what should happen if, contrary to expectation, my presence in Aztlan was needed for a longer time.

"In that case," Acora replied, "I ask you to send me the young knight Gerdung immediately, whom I will send with you. I have spoken with him. He is to put on Zipangu clothing and dye his fair, Nordic face yellow. He will quickly overtake my slowly riding group and bring me news of what has happened. But I urge you all the same, be quick. You, too, will ride swiftly without the hindrance of female travelers, and will catch up with me before my embarkation for Atlantis. I trust you will not spare your horse—for Atlanta's sake. Look, Godda Apacheta, what a coincidence! There she comes herself from the ruined gate. Excuse me now, for I am tired and wish to depart early."

And swiftly, with a greeting to Atlanta, my friend passed by and disappeared behind the walls of the ruined sanctuary.

"The duke sent me to you, Godda…" began Atlanta, shyly, hesitating whether to stay.

At that, I laughed at the coincidence our friend had arranged and did not let my beloved say more, but drew her into the Arowak's hut, and Atlanta followed me without a word and put her arms around my neck.

Then we both noticed that Acora had brought blankets and silk cushions into the poor dwelling of the native—he, the king's son, for the scholar

Apacheta and for Atlanta Framer. He had done it as darkness fell, while I was tending to the wounded.

Atlanta had seen the duke pacing back and forth, his steps unsteady from the violent quakes, and each time he carried some item with him—a cushion or a blanket—and she had not known why. And now we laughed together in the darkness and were glad it was night and we could not see one another in that moment.

In our hearts, we thanked our chivalrous friend, but soon forgot him, just as he might have wished, and remained in the hut that night.

The next day, I rode north, back to Aztlan, which I had left barely a week before, and with me came the knights and men-at-arms whom my royal friend had given me. When I turned in the saddle, I saw the little group of the Atlantean heir riding along the slope of Illimani and soon disappearing behind the rocks. One last wave of a white cloth fluttered from the window of the palanquin in which my beloved wife sat, and I saw a diamond on her hand flash like a flame before the mountains came between us. It was the last greeting from my beloved, whose happiness was my own, whose life and fate were bound with mine. And a heavy weight pressed on my heart, for I could have lost her, even though I had won her the night before. And the weight would not lift.

The hard waves of the earthquake still rolled in jolts through the rigid body of the royal mountains of the Eastern Andes, but at least it was possible, though slowly, to make our way onward. The horses showed an astonishing sure-footedness on the shifting ground, though they snorted with anxiety at every step. So we let go of the reins and allowed the animals to choose their own path without guidance, and it served us well. I had never believed one could get used to an earthquake lasting for days, and that the animals could as well was perhaps the most astonishing thing of all.

The sunken little town of Hanko lay beside us in the depths, without any sign of renewed life, and I do not believe that a single one of its inhabitants survived the plunge into the abyss to see the wave that leapt over them from within. Dead and deserted, the small community lay beneath the gray sky with its racing clouds. My intention to see for myself what had become of the people in Hanko had to be abandoned, as the horses' hooves immediately sank hopelessly into the mud, which had not yet formed a solid crust.

In drizzling rain, I rode thoughtfully with my people down to the plateau of Tiahusinju, which we had left only two days before—just in time to escape, in the icy heights of Illimani, the disaster that had forever wiped out the power and glory of the Atlantean borderland.

The difficulties in finding a passable route to Aztlan were nearly insurmountable due to the unfathomable depth of mud that covered the entire region, and I had to decide on a detour through the mountainous edges of the highland. There was no accommodation for the nights, since all inns and post stations had vanished into the ground, and not a single village stood on the plateau far and wide. Only in the heights of the Andes, along whose edge we rode northward, did we see undamaged native huts here and there—isolated, poor little farmsteads, which were far from sufficient to house such a considerable traveling party. So I aimed for the fortress of Tikina, which, along with the mining town of the same name, lay on my route if I took a day's journey to the west. On this occasion, I also intended to deliver the duke's order to withdraw to Atlantis; at the time, I had little hope of finding alive the governor of the land who held authority over his borderland.

At the elevated fortress of Tikina, Atlantean knights stood with their wives and children and their servants in front of ruined buildings. Nearly all were wounded, many had been killed by falling walls, as the earthquake had struck them in the night as well. Nevertheless, several slightly wounded young nobles of the fortress garrison were immediately willing to ride to Aztlan with me and also to muster a number of armed men from the surrounding mountain farms at the ore mines, who had likely escaped unharmed. In this way, my small force received reinforcements that later proved to be very useful.

The flood wave had been observed in Tikina much more clearly than it had been for us at Illimani, for it passed close beneath the fortress, so that one could look directly onto its broad, seething crest. It was said to have swept across the highland like a mountain-high wall in a wide, sweeping arc as far as the eye could see, and amid the dreadfully howling swirl, many dead humans and animals could be seen carried along; so that there was no doubt among the garrison that all life in Aztlan had perished and been wiped out.

The order I gave under these circumstances—though still with the reservation that Lord Framer was dead—namely, to evacuate the borderland and withdraw to Atlantis, was received with a sigh of relief. After all that had happened, there was no more expectation of being able to effectively oppose the Inga in Cuzco in the long run. That it nonetheless continued for two more years was due to the stubborn Northlander and the iron will of a man whom we all already counted among the dead.

By the next day, the mud that covered the highlands in varying thickness had solidified and formed a supporting crust, further strengthened by the drizzling ashfall from the fire-mountains of the Andes. Even the frequent downpours changed nothing, for the mud lay atop a base of permeable gravel and allowed the moisture to seep away quickly.

With a force of over fifty armed Atlanteans, I arrived after nightfall at the destroyed and flooded fortifications of the peninsula. I immediately saw that it was no longer a peninsula at all, but that everything within a wide area had become solid land, where once the shallow bays of Lake Aztlan had been. This meant that, in addition to the masses of freshwater from the north, large parts of the lake itself must have drained southward. Otherwise, the colossal height of the floodwave would be unimaginable.

At that time, I did not yet suspect, or at least did not realize to the extent I would later, that the new star Heldung-Atlanta possessed such immense power to move water and change its course from what it had been before. Still, as tradition demanded, I connected the disaster with the eerie Wanderer. I would have given much to observe the star once more, which I had last seen in Kalasasaya as a comet-like star with a silver corona and tail, but threatening and merciless, heavy clouds hung over the sky of Tiahusinju and blocked the view into the wide starry heavens of the Ancient Friend.

One should not be surprised that I still call the Ancient One a friend. Certainly, I had always taken this friendship personally, though I also knew very well that, in forging great fate, he paid no heed to the little star-watcher Godda Apacheta. And if, in that night in the hut, he granted me my beloved Atlanta through the chivalrous soul of Acora, then I—as a grain of dust on this green earth, as a wave among waves of the never-ending stream—could be content. Even though I was determined to fight for my life in knightly fashion, unbowed and with head held high to the bitter end, the thought no longer frightened me of being extinguished after a life of tens of thousands of years of Atlantean greatness and Nordic nobility. I hoped confidently that Atlanta would save the blood of my race, if the Ancient One had decided to destroy me.

Scarcely had we passed the abandoned fortifications when the earthquake broke out again with incredible violence, and we could see the Kjappia in the far distance seem to leap skyward with a flashing fire-beam. Continuing to ride was out of the question, as even the horses now stumbled and fell. So we dismounted and rested in the cold, rainy night, without a fire.

But I was tormented by restlessness, and, so close to my goal, I did not want to wait for morning. So I pressed on, marching on foot, and Kjappia shone so brightly that we could not miss the path—or rather, the direction. And though we stumbled, leading our snorting horses by the reins, and though the earth's waves rushed beneath us with jolting shocks so that we slipped and fell, still we advanced step by step and did not have to freeze in the icy rain. On the contrary, we became quite warm, and the men's lungs heaved from the effort of marching in the thin highland air.

We considered it impossible to meet any living being, let alone a person, on our way. I knew these native Zipangus and Arowaks; they feared the

night and would fear such a night of terror all the more, if any scattered groups still wandered the highland.

Long after midnight, we entered the city of Aztlan. But we passed over it as if it had never existed, and only the towering fortress of Akapana stood black against the flaming lights of the distant fire-mountain Kjappia.

As I lay on the ground, I could even see my solar observatory, Kalasasaya, with parts of its walls protruding from the mud that covered it many feet high. The flood wave had here, at Aztlan, overflowed from the open lake and had not yet carried with it such immense masses of mud and gravel as it later did at Illimani, after crossing the highland. Thus, the layer of mud it had poured over the ancient sacred city was not very thick, and Akapana seemed almost entirely spared, even though it was certain that the mountain-high wave had passed over that mighty structure as if it were a low hill. Given the tremendous width the wave appeared to have had, I did not believe that any living being could have been saved—neither in the city nor in the castle of Count Framer.

I was convinced that my only task would be to deliver Acora's order to the few mountain fortresses, farms, and mines that had been spared, instructing their garrisons with women and children to withdraw to Atlantis. Then I planned to hurry as quickly as possible after my friend, to catch up with him before his departure for the islands of the kingdom. That things would turn out differently, I did not yet know, as I approached the drowned fortress with my small force.

The deathly silence of the buried city weighed heavily on the souls of the Atlanteans who entered the site with me, where just a few days before the streets had not sufficed for the throngs of pilgrims, and where, in the necropolis and at Kalasasaya, there had been a life-threatening crush. In a single fateful night, all those people from almost every country on earth had been swept away. The Ancient One had wiped his hand over the borderland of Tiahusinju, and it was no more.

Just before daybreak, we reached the castle over alluvial gravel fields and crunching masses of fool's gold from Mount Kjappia, which on the east side was buried up to the first of its three terraces. It was therefore not difficult at this spot to climb over the still-intact wall—despite the earthquake—and make our way around the massive structure. Despite my conviction that we would encounter no human being, I did not neglect caution and moved step by step, pressed against the towering wall of the second terrace, toward the steep stairway I knew so well, leading up to the fortress. The black vault closely over arched the tall steps, gaping like a malicious maw, as if grinning at me. I confess that I paused a while and looked eastward to see if the light of the new day could already be seen over the rain-heavy royal Andes. A dull gray shimmer lay over the mountains, and dawn could not be far off.

The horses had been left behind. I could see them clearly, standing in the drizzling rain with drooping heads, swaying with the tremors, held by the mountain farmers I had brought from Tikina. And just as I was about to quietly give the command to ascend the steps—a command that, because of the underground rumbling, had to be passed from mouth to mouth—something whizzed through the air from above and landed with a soft clink in the gravel of the lower terrace. The sound was too familiar to leave any doubt!

That was the sound of an arrow as it springs from the string!

With that, all hesitation and reflection vanished. Action flared, blissful, through the deathly silence of Akapana. I tore off my black scholar's cloak and wound it around my right arm to serve as a kind of shield. With drawn dagger, I hurried up the dark stairway. And then I realized I was stepping over human bodies, embedded in hardened mud, but I did so without horror, for the arrow had awakened me. Behind me, I heard Acora's knights breathing and now and then the clinking of a weapon. The footsteps, too, were muffled by the soft ground they also walked upon.

Before the stairway could be blocked by an enemy, I was already on the second terrace of the fortress and thrust into the darkness, as I thought I saw a person.

His scream cut piercingly through the murky twilight of the waking morning, like a flash of lightning through brooding clouds. I paid no mind to the ringing clash of swords behind me; I knew the lords of Atlantis were doing their work without hesitation, and only speed could bring success.

So I stumbled up the last steps to the platform of Akapana, again hearing gasping breaths behind me and knowing that the bloody work had been quickly finished, that a short, fierce fight had taken place on the second terrace.

Once more, our feet climbed over corpses, and I slipped once, suspecting that it was the slain and not the drowned who, pressed together, covered the steep steps. The stairwell glared at me askew with pale morning light, like a square, sleepy eye reluctant to part with rest.

A black figure appeared in the patch of light and called down to ask what had happened. Since the voice spoke Zipangu, it was instantly clear to me in whose hands the greatest fortress of the borderland now lay. The question needed no repeating, for my dagger gave the answer.

The castle was awake!

Bellowing in fear, the fools among the Zipangu guards fled, though they could easily have struck me down—I who, without armor or shield, without helmet or sword, had charged at them armed only with a dagger. As it was, I hardly seemed to have seriously injured the man who had addressed me, for he ran like a mountain hare across the platform of Akapana as I now stood in the hall of lava stone, peering into the dawning morning.

All at once it was day, as happens beneath the high sun of the low latitudes, where dawn is brief, and in Framer's hall the clash of swords and the cries of war flared up, mingled with the panic-stricken shouts of the Zipangu guards at the stairway.

The mighty, deep voice of the old Count Framer thundered with joyful clarity behind the flashing ranks of advancing bronze shields, but I could see at once that the number of shield-bearers barely reached ten, that the inferiority of Framer's force compared to the hundreds of Zipangus who everywhere leapt from behind collapsed walls and piles of corpses was so great that our help had arrived at precisely the right moment.

In the middle of the former artificial pond, near the drainage channel to the castle moat, lay a large war galley, half-buried in the mud with broken masts. How it had come to be there was immediately clear to me. In any case, the flood wave must have swept it up from the harbor and deposited it at the doorstep of Count Framer as a final memento of his once-proud fleet on the Lake of Tiahusinju. Behind the wrecked ship, the area was swarming with armed men from Cuzco. These people must have been living on the high ground when the flood came, and so they escaped death. I was well aware that their numbers must have been considerable, for in former times, the tent cities of the pilgrims stretched all around Aztlan, even up to the mountain peaks. And these people, who had been lucky enough to escape disaster, had taken possession of Akapana, believing it to be unguarded. But they also knew from folk tales that the fabled treasures of the Lord of Akapana were kept in the royal house. And now, unexpectedly, they had encountered resistance. As inexplicable as it seemed to me, the old Count Framer was alive and fighting back with his well-known and feared force, so that until now the Zipangus from Cuzco had failed to take the houses that Lord Framer, with a handful of Atlantean men of unbroken courage, defended.

The unexpected appearance of my now considerable force turned the tide with stormy swiftness. The fear of the "white children of the sun," as the Cuzcos called us, served as our ally. Attacked from two sides, most of the enemy surrendered their weapons, while the rest fought desperately at the entrance to the drainage trench, from which there was no escape, since its outlet into the fortress moat must have been buried deep in mud and debris from the lake. Yet this remnant of the Cuzco men did not seem intent on surrendering like the others, for now their dangerous weapons—their arrows—whistled out of the

tall rectangular mouth of the man-high stone channel. And just as I dropped my cloak and, glad of our swift victory, was about to embrace the gray Lord Framer, I saw an arrow whiz past the old man's head like a fine streak—and I knew it was headed straight for my face, knew it in the tiniest instant I had to think—and then the stabbing pain shot through my left eye and right through my whole head, down to the nape of my neck!

With my uninjured eye, I stared, petrified, along the shaft of the fatal missile, and then Akapana spun around me like a giant top; I reeled and ran away, toward the enemy—not because I wanted to fight on, but simply because I happened to be facing that direction. Black and colored images flashed lightning-fast through my mind, and in my furious pain, I ran over the uppermost rampart of the fortress into the void, trying to escape the dreadful arrow, and fled in terror up to the mountains of the Andes and into the clouds, always keeping my healthy eye fixed in stunned horror on the swaying arrow with its slanted fletching at the end of the shaft. Lashed by mortal fear, I shot through the cloud cover, which clung damp and clammy to my limbs. The gray path seemed endless, but I kept flying upward without rest.

Then the sun flashed out! The glorious sun, which I had not seen since the chain of fate began to choke the noble realm of Atlantis and since the view into the starry realm of the Ancient Friend had been blocked.

It was utterly silent in the icy heights, and the pain lingered only as a dull drilling in my head, diminishing the further I traveled, freely out into the cold expanse, and once I had passed the boundaries of the shimmering breath of life, the pain was gone. But I flew on with increasing speed into the garden of the Ancient One, past gleaming blocks of white stone that circled the earth in steady, rushing arcs—what we humans called shooting stars when we watched them flit across the black sky on dark nights toward dawn. Far in the distance, they flew, nimble spirits of the cosmos, across the velvet of the garden, seemingly slow, flashing, and of such radiant white that the sun itself seemed to reflect in them. I saw blue fire flicker around their gleaming bodies like little bolts of lightning, and I was seized by a longing to ride upon them around the old earth, so close to my homeland as they circled it. How often had I seen them streak by like pale ghosts, and now I could almost grasp them with my hands! But the flight out into the garden swept me away too quickly.

Unwavering, I gazed along the shaft of the arrow, whose feathered end pointed toward a white, brightly illuminated disk. And this disk could not be hidden by the rays of the sun; it shimmered like pure, refined silver in the black garden of infinite space, wreathed in mist and with luminous, flickering rays jutting out sideways into the void and fading into nothingness. Like a sparkling, colossal wheel, Heldung-Atlanta hung in the velvet sky, and at once I saw that the Wanderer was traveling with the old green Earth, firmly fixed within its magical circle. Dancing in slow motion, Earth and star swung around each other

and sped along their shared path around the radiant sun. As I flew ever faster away from Earth, Heldung-Atlanta grew at a dizzying pace. The monstrous star blotted out the blackness of space, and I clearly saw silver mountains wavering on its surface, as if they were drunken; saw them slide over one another and rise up high, then collapse again, as if they were brittle sheets of white glass. Vast, land-sized floes drifted mysteriously by, like icebergs on the seas of the Earth's northern and southern ice-lands.

The intoxicating flight pressed ever closer, breathlessly, for now I seemed to feel the wind of the aether that did not wish to make way for me, and the arrow in my eye pointed unswervingly into the center of the radiant giant disk of the star of destiny.

A faint clinking and rushing sounded in my ear, land-masses shoved apart with bursting cracks over heaped-up mountain ranges, whole chains of mountains shattered apart with ringing sounds and deep, gaping fissures, and I saw a flood wave circling the star of my fate—regal and high, with slow, steady movement—while the ice-crackling continental plates groaned and heaved under the watery, steaming wall, so that I could see their mountain-thick sides, split open like stone slabs, floating over the flood wave as drifting giant rafts.

But the pull of the sphere Heldung-Atlanta seized me and spun me in a tearing, whirling rush around its circumference, toward the high flood wave that rolled beneath me, heaped with debris. I saw night descend over the dreadful Wanderer, who was now part of the Earth, and felt the icy cold that enveloped its body with flickering rays. Swathed in flashing mist, I flew over darkly shining floating lands, which drifted past with bursting fissures. I flew once more toward the day, which rose in dazzling light over white ice-peaks in the distance, and over glittering, wavering snowfields and crashing mountain ranges I traced my silent path once more toward the night of Heldung-Atlanta, sped through it in a few heartbeats, and swam again in the silvery light.

The arrow in my left eye pointed unwaveringly toward the center of the icy sphere, and as I spiraled in flight just above the white star, I saw in the sparkling mist my Ancient Friend standing on a mountain and climbing above the towering flood wave! And there, he waved to me kindly with his hand!

Wildly, I hurled myself down to catch him, for he had much to tell me, and I had many questions, and stumbling, I plunged into the soft, fine snow so that it flew up high and wrapped me in a cloud of the most delicate powder. Helplessly, I slid in a racing sled-ride down the slope of a mountain, gliding over an open water fissure as if it were not even there, and only when the slope rose did I lose momentum and was able to stand up. But breathless, I ran up the smooth slope, hoping to seize the Old One and hold him fast before he slipped away from me again. But then the white light of the sun shot dazzlingly over the

peaks of the ice giants and blinded me for a moment even in my healthy eye, and when I turned my gaze aside, the Old One was gone!

But his laughter rang out, good and friendly, from beyond the towering crags out of the light. Today I will catch you, Destroyer! Never again shall you escape Godda Apacheta—not again, not ever, as so often before, as always, when I chased after you like a madman so that you would reveal your secrets to me!

Hey, Old One! What's going on with your Wanderer, Heldung-Atlanta? Have you bound him to your old Earth, so that from now on he must journey with her? You shattered his hard shell of mountain-thick ice into fragments, so that the white, cold blood of the star gushes from gigantic wells beneath my feet, steaming and boiling in the fullness of thin aether, as if fire burned at the core of death's cold. Bubbling, the blood rises to the surface and swiftly and easily spreads out in a ring in all directions, pushing ahead of itself shards of ice in terrifying, mountainous layers, and the white vapor rises above it and flickers as frozen needles in the cold sunlight. Now the land sinks, the giant ring wall formed by the bubbling spring slides deep into the abyss, ice blocks dance swirling around the fissure where the spring disappears, piling up into a mountain cone so that the waters slurp and hiss, angry that their way back into the star is blocked. And with radiant spears, the mirrored ice glimmers across a wide, wide circle, frozen stone-hard in the clanging cold of the garden. Again the floodwave surges and shatters the massive sheet like mountain glass, and, rejoicing, the imprisoned blood carves a path from deep crevices!

Yes, Ancient One, here you have raised a different floodwave than the small one that overran Aztlan! High it rises, while I stand on a hard ice floe and search for you with aching eyes. A different earthquake resounds around the circle of Heldung-Atlanta than the one that broke forth from the depths of the green Earth. A hundred times stronger, Earth now shakes her new companion, than Heldung shakes the Earth, and I sense the force that is being crushed. Over all the mountains and ice giants of the star, I climb slowly upward, lifted by an undreamt-of power of flood, the glass-hard ice spraying in crashing bursts from the edges of my floe, and I must stop now, for before me the unfathomable, icy sea roars up with a bluish shimmer, boiling with cold, so that silvery mist whips out into the garden with its glittering needles, whipping my hands and cheeks like sharp, tiny thorns. Frost clings to the arrow shaft before my left eye, and the angled feathers carry a delicate layer of snowy dust. And I shiver in the cold mist; oh, that I cast off my black cloak, which kept my shoulders so warm!

Are you tickling my neck, Ancient Brother of the cosmos? I whirl around so that the snow flies up around me, and grasp at emptiness!

I almost caught you. There your laughter darts through the crack in the floe. See, you must crawl under the ice to hide yourself from Godda

Apacheta!—Why couldn't Aztlan float, as does my giant floe, on which I stand so well?

How glorious the ride down is, descending the wave that rolls beneath me with boiling, steaming flood. Now I see the peaks of the ice giants again at arrow-height, level with my gaze, but then the wave lifts the world's weight of the ice mountain onto its broad shoulders as if it were nothing, and flings them upward, and I sink at the same time down into the broad valley, full of clattering, continent-wide sheets, wrapped in the seething watery mist of the wandering sea. Rocking, I drift along, the mountains nod to me unsteadily, somewhere the Ancient One sits quietly on the cool sphere of Heldung-Atlanta, and Godda Apacheta ponders the incomprehensible, sitting on a block of ice, his weary head resting in his hand. The arrow shines silver, sunlight beading on it through white veils of crystalline dust, and from my breathing the shaft trembles, jutting from my eye like a slender rod, swaying to the beat of the blood that bathes it. A fine pain twitches in my neck, and I touch the aching spot where the skin rises beside the cervical vertebra.

A stabbing ache pulses beneath, but I burst out laughing!

Thank you, Ancient One, for tickling me there! In the midst of the icy horror of your dreadful Wanderer Heldung-Atlanta, you've given me a splendid idea! On the land-plate of glaring ice, Godda Apacheta has discovered that you once again meant well for the stargazer from Aztlan. Did I have to fly to your cold star to learn that? The arrow with its sharp tip and two cruel barbs never moves backward! It sits fast in my head, and now I know its path. I know the human brain, after all. How often has it lain before me, peeled out by my sharp knife.

The sharp arrow slid under the eye and took a strange course, just beneath the shell enclosing the brain, and just beside the cervical vertebra that guides life. There the painfully tickling tip with its barbs stabs into the skin, and I can feel the sharpness with numbed fingers. Where is the little sharp knife to open the way to this devilish guest? The skin is well frozen, and the flesh beneath crackles with frost when I try to knead it, so as to work my way around the point of the malicious messenger from Zipangu. Just a small cut, and a few tears that flow from my eyes—not from joy, for the keenness of the blade is no joy—and the tip is exposed. I need only grasp it and break it off from the wood, then the shaft must retrace its path, the same it took when it flew past Framer's head into my eye socket, and no barb will impede its way.

Where are you, Old Brother? Where are you hiding?

Is that why you lured me away from the Earth, to despair in pain, so that I would race madly through the clouds over the mountains and up into your garden, tormented by the curse of death that hovered over me as your star

Heldung-Atlanta hovers over the great Atlantis, the golden city of the Nordic nobles?

But now you have given me the path that overcomes death, and now I want to see you, you who laugh at the fate of your friend Apacheta.

Atlanta, Atlanta, I will not die! Godda Apacheta lives and will return to the green Earth, even if I must search, wandering over land and sea, and even if Atlantis is lost, I will find you, Atlanta, you faithful, noble woman!

Through the crashing of the floes, the icy silence of empty space seeps in, and the booming of the drifting mountains of ice fades dull and hollow in the garden of the stars. The Ancient One is gone, I can feel it, and again I have not caught him, as I have so often wished to do for as long as I have lived, and I have lived for many world-ages in good friendship with the Friend, and have never been able to grasp him. So I must be humble again and keep wandering. Where water fissures yawn, the icy water swirls around my feet, covers me in a high surge, and when the fall is over, freezing water trickles from my limbs and turns to hard white stone. Then the giant slab on which I walk rises up, the floodwave rolls steeply toward me again, so that the distant mountains shrink like dwarf hills. Again I am carried aloft by the mysterious force that moves the water with magical pull; the slab thrusts out into the void, and I fly away.

A wild spite flows through my frozen heart, for behind me, on the star Heldung-Atlanta, I hear the fading laughter of the Ancient One, as if he were regretting my departure. I know well, he has outwitted me yet again and now tries to laugh at me. Surely he was standing right next to me, as I sat on the floe pondering his riddles. Now it seems to me as if he has kicked me into the void, into the dusty haze of the star, which now travels with the Earth, silently circling her instead of journeying alone on nearly the same path.

How tired the frost makes my limbs!

My brain grows cold, and I can no longer think. And as I am about to close my eyes, I realize that my left eye refuses to serve me, because the thin shaft of the arrow still lies beneath it with stubborn malice, and through the gap the arrow creates, I see the Earth, wrapped in white clouds upon which the sun shines, and with my weary gaze I see the flames of the fire-mountains gleaming through the desolate smoke; everywhere they flare on the globe of clouds, which allows no view of sea or land, and the fine mist of sulfurous gases stings numbly at my nose.

As I break through the veil of clouds, I feel that I have fallen asleep, content and happy, because I know the path that overcomes death.

THE LAST FORTRESS

Godda Apacheta is not a ghost.

The stargazer of the Kalasasaya has never had the ambition to frighten harmless people so that their hair stands on end from horror and dread.

And yet I now had to see that my appearance had exactly that effect, and at first I did not even suspect that such an effect was possible, because my brain could not yet think, and because I did not even know that I was lying on Akapana among slain Zipangus and arrow-struck Atlanteans. I certainly felt the rain trickling down, but I did not know that it was rain. I could hear the quiet breath of a man nearby, but I did not know that people breathe or that you can hear it. I also heard voices and the clashing of weapons, but I knew nothing of battle. Full of wonder, I looked up along the shaft of my arrow, which pointed black against the night sky, and I wondered in amazement how the swaying thin wood could have gotten into my eye, since surely it couldn't just float above it!

And then I became aware of a sharp, drilling pain in my brain, and felt the pulse of blood along the entire path that the thin arrow had forced through my skull, and I could even feel its tip pricking against the inner wall of my skin, right beside the vertebrae of my neck. And when I tried to turn my head, the stabbing pain multiplied a hundredfold, so that I nearly lost consciousness again and wanted to close my eyes. But when I did, I could still see, with my left eye, along the shaft of the arrow, and it then looked like a short, almost dot-like stick with a tuft of feathers at the end. Strangely, if I brought my other eye to help, the arrow would grow with lightning speed and point maliciously into the black sky.

I enjoyed this little game, and so I let the arrow grow and shrink as often as I pleased, and had no other concerns.

I heard some voice speaking about free withdrawal with weapons, but I didn't care what other people were saying. I only half understood it anyway, perhaps because the words were spoken in Zipangu, and what did the yellow men of Cuzco with their slanting eyes matter to me?

"So you will go hungry for another day, Inga, and then you will decide," I heard a deep voice that I must have heard somewhere before.

And the voice continued, hard and merciless, speaking of unconditional surrender and handing over of weapons, of court-martial and just retribution, and I still did not know who was speaking. Soon I forgot about it and continued my little game with the changing image of the arrow, and the voice hummed in my ear, for it was a voice from home, with a northern accent like my old mother had, who also came from the northlands.

And above the arrow, as if in a white mist, appeared the image of the beloved old woman with the white hair, smiling at me as if I were lying in the cradle in our house in golden Atlantis, and I stretched out my arms and wanted to put them around her neck, to weep—I don't know why.

Then, as I lowered my arms, I struck the shaft of the arrow with my hand, and the terrible pain at the back of my neck made me sit up with a jolt.

Then I awoke and carefully stretched my numb limbs, which had become rather stiff from lying so long among the pile of cold, still men.

And as I stood upright in the glow of a small fire flickering at some distance—I didn't know exactly where—I heard gurgling cries and clattering retreats, so that I wondered who might be roaming about here in the dark of night. Right in front of me, however, a human figure rose up, who had been kneeling behind a wall of corpses, and I saw his shield and battle bow fall from his hands as he stood up and stretched both hands toward me, as if in defense.

By the posture and slightness of the figure, I recognized him as a Zipangu, and I ordered him to support me, for I suddenly began to sway again and feared I might collapse once more. But I had no desire for that, so I commanded the fellow sharply not to stare at me so foolishly, but to stand beside me so I could put my arm around his shoulders.

I don't know if he understood me; apparently, for some reason, he couldn't grasp the sense of my command. So I walked up to him, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to me so that he was nearly leaning against my chest. I saw the whites of his squinting, staring eyes fixed on my face, and I heard a peculiar chattering, as if someone's teeth were rattling from the cold. Like a will-less bundle, the man leaned against my chest, and I slung my arm around his shoulder and started walking, as best I could, toward the light—toward the fire whose glow I had seen. The Zipangu, obedient but with shaking knees, crept along beside me and patiently bore the weight of my body, which I leaned heavily upon him, for my exhaustion knew no bounds.

Together we clambered over the piled-up mass of bodies that lay before the dark mouth of the drainage passage, right past the spot where I'd heard the frantic scuffling when I first rose up. And since the Zipangu still stared at me, I looked back at him again to give him courage, as he seemed to be quite afraid for some reason. But when my gaze met his, his teeth chattered all the more, and now I realized the man was utterly freezing. I thought I looked at him with kind sympathy, but the Zipangu's eyes rolled in their sockets and still couldn't tear themselves from my face. Even so, he staggered obediently step by step toward the watchfire, behind which reddish lights flickered, as if men with armor and weapons were standing there.

Soundless stillness dripped through the night, blood ticked in my head, and I heard the heavy, wheezing breaths of my kindly yellow-skinned helper.

Then a bronze shield clanged on the ground.

"Godda Apacheta!" bellowed a mighty voice from the sparkling heap behind the fire, and "Godda Apacheta!" echoed hoarsely in reply.

I saw a gray head leap through the flames—right through them—so that sparks flared all around me, and then I felt a giant-strong arm about my shoulders. But the poor Zipangu, who had so loyally helped me, was sent flying with a tremendous kick through the shower of sparks into the group of waiting shield-bearers. Now I recognized where I was.

Right beside me, the old, stern face of Count Framer of Tiahusinju glowed in the flickering light, and the gray skull pressed lovingly to my cheek. I saw tears streaming down the furrowed cheeks of the old lord as he all but embraced me and led me to Framer's Hall with motherly care and tenderness. I nearly lost consciousness again, but then I saw a familiar, careworn face beneath snow-white hair, and I was truly able to speak the word Mother clearly, so that the beloved woman broke out in sobs, yet smiled at the same time to show me how glad she was to have me back.

Then I sat in Framer's armchair at the table, with soft cushions behind my back and a pleasant warmth flooding over my frozen limbs. I greedily drank hot fruit juice and was not even surprised that it wasn't wine, though I would have much preferred that now.

On a stool at the table sat the Zipangu, slumped and broken, but he still stared at me as if I were a ghost and not Godda Apacheta, the star-wise of Aztlan.

I saw familiar, good faces glowing in the dim light of an oil lamp, but everyone stared at my eyes with embarrassed horror, until at last I understood and quietly laughed. The arrow was still lodged in my head and stuck out, bobbing and trembling from the socket of my left eye over the polished table, and I thought that it really must look rather crazy.

With a staggering, awkward motion, I handed my golden cup to my mother to fill, and I asked her not to cry, that I wasn't doing so badly at all—I was just thirsty and tired, and I would like something to eat too, if anything could be rustled up in the kitchen at so late an hour.

Several servants and girls, who had been waiting silently in the corner, rushed out at this request to get what was needed, and never in my life have I been served so quickly as on that night.

"We have to get the arrow out," I said to Lord Framer, whose weathered face glowed beside me.

My old mother began to cry again and said yes, the arrow had to be removed, but I already saw that nobody thought it possible; for we Atlanteans knew the cruel projectiles of our national enemy all too well. In general, it was out of the question to pull one out, because of the sharp barbs, and all the more so with an eye, which is so vulnerable!

And because the embarrassed and painful silence was almost comical, I was seized by an inexplicable wild cheerfulness—a certainty of life that the Ancient One had instilled in me, as I suddenly dimly recalled, on the icy star Heldung-Atlanta, when he gave me the idea of removing the arrow in the simplest way in the world.

I gazed around the room with swimming eyes.

There sat the knights of Aztlan and Atlantis, there sat the old Lord Framer and my good mother with her trembling mouth, there stood the young brave noblemen from Tikina with their eyes wide open in horror and pity, there was the Zipangu's yellow face with its twisted, staring eyes fixed on mine, and quiet weeping of women came from a corner, so I turned to see who it was that wept for Godda Apacheta. And I missed Dana Framer. There were only three young girls from the Kalasasaya, children I knew well, since they had been entrusted to my mother's care and so often sat with her while I worked at my desk. It was so sweet, how the young things cried for me, and I almost cried myself, if I hadn't been in such a mischievous, cheerful mood.

"Where is Lady Dana Framer?" I asked softly, when the silence became oppressive. I would have liked to see the kind woman and deliver greetings from her daughter Atlanta, my beloved wife.

At first, no one answered the question; then the count replied in his hard, immovable voice that Lady Dana had drowned.

I don't really remember whether this news made much of an impression on me, sad as it was, for I had assumed all those who lived here in Akapana—except for the Atlantean lords of the Acora and the few young nobles from Tikina—were dead. Now they all sat around me and looked at me as if I were some wondrous, exotic creature.

"I see," I said absentmindedly, and looked along the shaft of my arrow, which was pointed directly at the Zipangu.

I asked who the man was who had so kindly helped me over the pile of fallen warriors.

"It is the Inga of Cuzco," replied Lord Framer curtly.

Again I had to laugh, though it hurt, and I said I had made quite a catch, without intending to, and I only regretted that the Inga would now have to be hanged. But Framer shook his gray head.

"I wanted to hang him, if I had forced him to surrender, because he abused the hospitality of the realm of Atlantis. But now he shall have knightly imprisonment, since you captured him in such a peculiar manner," said the count. I did not fully understand this leniency, but I was content with the favorable decision of the lord of Akapana, and thought it entirely fitting to the honorable nature of the old knight. And now I asked the dangerous question of who would dare to pull the arrow from my eye.

At this, the count's head sank forward onto the table, and he answered in a choked voice that he could not, and he did not want to say why he could not.

I looked at my mother and smiled, I was so certain. "You, mother?" my arrow-adorned eye asked. And the woman nodded to me, but I could see that her heart was writhing in agony.

Then I regretted my mischievousness, and I asked my mother to gently feel my neck with her hand. Did she feel anything there?

Oh, how quickly mothers understand when it's about the life of their child! At first she sobbed with relief, for she was not for nothing the wife of a doctor and mathematician, and the mother of a star-wise and healer, that she immediately felt the flame of hope ignite in a heart that had beat for me all its long life.

Again I had to suppress a laugh, as determination tightened the withered features of the old woman until they looked almost youthful, and she stood up and her commands softly flew into the darkness beyond the hall door, so that I heard hurried footsteps in the stone halls and muffled calling and gentle scolding.

Until the servants came with the hot food, I gazed absently at the poor Inga of Cuzco, whom I had captured in such a strange way, and had in fact also saved from a shameful death. But when I tried to start a sensible conversation

with Lord Framer, my mind failed me, and I just stared tiredly ahead, annoyed by the arrow-shaft that stubbornly echoed every movement of my head.

I did not leave the food untouched, even though after the first few bites I had no real appetite left. Then my mother returned and, smiling, handed me a small crystal cup with green liquid. I knew what it was, and examined the contents as if I had to give it to another patient. It was enough so that I would not feel the knife-cuts—or only barely—so I nodded approvingly, looked once more around the room, and drained the cup of coca juice in one gulp.

I waited quietly for the effect of the sedative, and the count supported my head so it would not sink onto the table, or even so that the arrow-shaft would not hit the polished surface, and then I drifted into the fresh distance conjured by the coca, so that the soul was free of all wishes and happy, and the body without pain. And when I told my mother, who was standing behind me and whom I could therefore not see, that she could now begin to cut and should just carefully feel around the arrowhead to loosen it and detach it from the shaft, she had already placed the fine flint tip of the ominous murder weapon before me on the table. And I stared at it, blankly and with amazement, as it lay white with bloody spots on the shimmering surface of the noble wood. But when I leaned my head back against the rest of Framer's chair so that the arrow-shaft pointed to the ceiling, and when my mother's old, wrinkled hand grasped the slender wood firmly and without trembling, it seemed to me a miracle that one could watch such things without being afraid.

Slowly the devilish shaft moved, and I was not aware that breathless silence reigned in Framer's hall, and that many hands covered their eyes in dreadful fear and cramped fingers pressed their lips, until I thought I heard, as if from afar, a surging confusion of voices that sounded unreal and muddled to my drugged ears, and the sobbing, choking weeping of women and girls, and the scraping of chairs, and running and calling.

An old, dear face bent over me, but I could barely make it out because a wet stream ran from my eye, and I thought it must be blood. But if it was blood, then the arrow could no longer be stuck in the eye! Dizzily I raised my head, but it would not obey me and sank forward into my mother's hands. Red seeped through the fine old fingers that held my face, and I felt her lift my head, and then I knew nothing more, except that it was very quiet and lovely around me, and even quieter and more beautiful in my heart.

So I lay in my mother's arms, who alone had had the courage to give the child life once again, as she had done before, and I took her for my ancient friend and laughed, because he could suddenly be so tender, who otherwise always had a mocking word ready when it came to teasing Godda Apacheta.

You see, dear brother, on your star Heldung-Atlanta, you must come in women's clothing to hide your heart and do me good. I really think you've hidden yourself in Mother from the beginning, because you didn't want to show that you too can be soft. It is important that I now know in what form you most like to walk upon your green earth.

You are always new and surprising to me!

Meanwhile, the effect of the coca drink had become complete. I lived in an unknown but pleasant dream world, without desire and without pain, and I believe that in the future I might envy those people who habitually drink this mild poison.

I, too, got used to it, because I knew it was hardly harmful, and because my old mother was all too willing to bring the pain-relieving drink to my bedside again and again. She surely had her reasons for doing so, for I did not know that the wound openings would not close and that the healing was progressing very slowly. I did, however, notice for myself that I had lost the sight in my left eye, but under the pleasant intoxication of the drug it did not bother me.

When the effect of the numbing drink had worn off, I lay awake on my back and looked up at the golden ceiling of a room located in the royal house. Framer had given it to me, and I took this as a sign of his immense gratitude for the timely help in dire need of battle—and perhaps also for the capture of the Inga, even though I truly was rather innocent in that heroic deed.

A piercing pain plagued my head during waking hours, but at times I wanted to participate in what was happening around me, and would not drink the cup that my mother gave me to dull my pain. Then I heard, through the small arched windows in the thick walls of the royal house, a jumble of voices and the crack of whips echoing from the terrace of Akapana; the sharp smell of burning drifted in fine traces over my bed, so that one time I asked what was happening outside.

My mother replied that the count was having the corpses burned and the courtyard of the castle cleared and excavated by captured Zipangus, because the mud was many feet deep and new dead kept surfacing from the clay. The fallen Atlanteans, she said, had already been burned weeks ago along with the galley that had been half-buried in the pond on the castle terrace, but I could not have seen it because I had been delirious with fever from my wounds.

Then I remembered the flood wave and asked if it was true, what I believed I had experienced, and how it was possible that my mother and the others had escaped the wave, even though the flood must certainly have swept over everyone, mountain-high. I learned that the rescue of my mother and three

young girls from the Kalasasaya had only been possible by chance, for the women, out of some vague restlessness, had not been in the Kalasasaya on the night of the terrible earthquake, but had gone to Dana Framer at the castle, to talk about the children who were on the dangerous journey to Atlantis. The earthquake had begun shortly before midnight and raged terribly, but the buildings of Akapana had not given way by even a hand's breadth. I am, after all, familiar with the reliable construction of those gigantic thick lava walls.

Dana Framer, despite the storm-like swaying of the walls, had gone down to the hall to look for the count and fetch the servants. She had then been surprised in the hall by the water of the flood wave and was unable to escape back up to the sleeping rooms. Only those who had happened to remain in these upper rooms escaped disaster, even though they had to stand for a long time, almost up to their necks in water. The flood in the sleeping quarters never rose higher than the small round-arched windows, because the entrances to these rooms are from below, and the air above the windows could not escape. Unfortunately, at the onset of the earthquake, almost all the knights had run out into the courtyard to be in the open air, and all of these had drowned and been swept away by the flood wave. Of the great garrison of the Akapana fortress, which had once numbered well over five hundred noblemen and warriors, barely ten escaped death—and these were the ones who had run back to retrieve some object dear to their hearts.

All had only thought of the earthquake, not of a wave that could sweep over Akapana, and since it was night, it could not be seen.

“I climbed up onto the bed and table with the girls when the water surged into the bedroom with unbelievable force,” my mother concluded. “We clung to the bronze torch holders on the walls and waited, in complete darkness, for what seemed an endless amount of time, until suddenly the water receded just as quickly as it had come in.”

Herr Framer, too, had been saved in this way, for he was searching through the various rooms to get the occupants outside when the water suddenly appeared and forced him to take refuge on a table. Even the old count had to cling to a chandelier, his head pressed up close to the stone ceiling of the room he happened to be in. And there too, the water could not displace the air, because the thick stone ceiling had remained completely sealed despite the earthquake. The flood had already passed before the trapped air could find a way out through any thin cracks or crevices.

“And then the Zipangus came down from the mountains and attacked the fortress?” I asked.

Yes, that is how it happened, my mother replied, stroking my hand. The Inga himself, who had kept himself hidden until then, led the Zipangus, and only

my timely arrival with the Atlantean knights had prevented the fortress, with its few defenders, from falling into the hands of the Cuzcos.

The count seemed to be in good spirits again.

His booming voice echoed over the terrace of Akapana, and it was a joy to hear it. I learned that the harvest from the stepped mountain fields was being brought to the fortress, and that thousands of wandering pilgrims, who had been camping up there in tents, were now working for the lord of Akapana—without him needing to force them, since the state treasury of the lord of Akapana was well stocked, and the workers, though paid little, were always paid promptly.

When my mother, at my urgent request, allowed me to go outside and wrapped me in warm blankets, bedding me down in a sheltered spot before the royal house so that my bandaged head could even feel the faint warmth of the sun filtering down through the hazy, smoke-filled sky, I saw for myself that Herr Framer had no intention of giving up the borderland. In fact, the only way one could even tell that we were still in Aztlan was by the almost unchanged appearance of the fortress Akapana—otherwise, the land had become completely unfamiliar. The lake was entirely gone, the same lake that once joyfully encircled the holy city with its damp blue ribbon. In the far distance, a gray stripe could be seen before the mountains of the Andes, and my mother explained to me that this gray stripe was now the lake of Aztlan, which had moved a day's journey away from us.

As far as I could see over what used to be the city, only a few remnants of walls jutted out from higher spots above a whitish-gray layer of sand and clay, and I could imagine that these gray fields could only be entered with unspeakable horror, for there, piled up four men high, must lie the corpses of drowned and buried people and animals. When the wind blew from the city up toward Akapana, it carried with it the terrible stench of the corpses, those sticking out from the very top of the layer of death.

Clouds of eagles and vultures hovered over the unfortunate city, and if one of the young knights hurled a stone from the ramparts of the fortress in a wide arc down into the depths, a black cloud of these ravenous birds would rise from the spot where it fell, only to quickly descend again to continue their gruesome feast.

Herr Framer was not at all dissatisfied with the work of these animals, for the lord of Akapana always thought like a caring father of his borderland. What the vultures accomplished, he didn't need to have done by others, if only because there simply weren't enough laborers to cover up that immense number of human and animal corpses. Through the work of the birds of prey, however, the field of the dead—which stretched out over the city and its wide

surroundings—became whiter each day from countless bones. I can imagine the bewildered astonishment of a man who, perhaps after many years or centuries, might walk across that white-gray field of bones and pale clay, from which the upper parts of collapsed walls of enormous buildings still protrude. He would shake his head and look over to the distant bright stripe of the great lake, lying on the horizon before the mountains of the crossing Andes, marvel at the remains of the extensive harbor installations, and wonder how Aztlan could have been a lake city without a lake.

Yet Herr Framer still had other worries, even if his voice sounded as if he knew nothing of such concerns. I sometimes saw him standing by the wall next to the stairway, gazing into the distance toward the lake of Aztlan, which was now no longer the lake of the great holy city, and I could almost read through his back the torment in his soul. Once, Aztlan had been a densely populated peninsula, and the two barrier fortresses at the edge protected the community from any landward attack. But at sea, Herr Framer had been the undisputed master. Now, the buried and drowned city was exposed to attack from all sides, and on the distant lake, only a few small boats now sailed—ones hardly worthy of the name war galleys, unless they happened to be crewed by a handful of seafaring Northmen.

The power of proud Atlantis in its borderland against the people of the Inga of Cuzco had become quite small, and the means left to maintain this power were modest indeed. The border fortresses in the crossing Andes had had to be abandoned, since the few Atlanteans who had held out behind the collapsed walls had been attacked and partly destroyed by superior hordes of Zipangus. Even my fief of Apacheta, with its city and castle, was in the enemy's hands. So long as the Cuzcos on the crossing Andes, beyond the lake, wished it, the Atlanteans in Aztlan remained unchallenged lords only over the lifeless borderland of Tiahusinju—this vast high plain without a people.

These thoughts must have weighed heavily on the proud count. From the sky-piercing mountains of the Andes, the looming power of the Cuzcos threatened, seeming to slink invisibly across the empty, devastated land, strewn with stones, covered in pale clay, the grave of the hundreds of thousands who had once inhabited the highlands despite its harsh weather and meager harvests. Aztlan had become a tomb for the peoples of all continents, for we had counted more than thirty different races who had come from all over the world to the solstice festival at Kalasasaya. Now all were covered by the gray mud of the lake; in deep solitude, the inhospitable land fell silent, sending chills of abandonment even down the spine of the stubborn old man of Akapana, who refused to relinquish the glory of the realm, defying fate and the judgment of the Ancient One, against the Cuzcos, and against death and despair.

We, his last knights, knew that the Duke of Acora's order to the garrisons of the surviving fortresses and settlements—to withdraw to Atlantis in

the lowlands—was only to be carried out if Herr Framer had lost his life in the disaster. But the old lord lived, more energetic and healthier than ever, and had no intention of giving up the post entrusted to him by the king in Atlantis. He did not know that he was fighting against powers even his unbreakable will could not overcome, nor did he know what I knew with an uncanny sense of certainty: that Atlantis itself had also been wiped from the history of this earth.

Nevertheless, I liked the father of my beloved Atlanta. He could not be any different. He too hurled the lance of his soul toward the highest peaks, tirelessly struggling with the Ancient One for supremacy, and, in the end, remained victorious, even in defeat and under the fate pronounced by the star Heldung-Atlanta.

Meanwhile, I was burning with impatience to follow after my friend, who must long since have set sail for Atlantis but was expecting me—and whom I must join, for I had promised him, and because my heart drew me on—not only to him, but all the more to Atlanta, my noble wife.

The sun, almost always still shrouded in clouds, had already long since reached the winter solstice again, and I realized that I had lain ill on Akapana for nearly three-quarters of a solar year, because the channel gouged through my skull by the Zipangu arrow was healing only very slowly and kept breaking open again to discharge water and pus. My left eye, with which I could at first still see tolerably well, was now completely lost, and an unsightly bandage covered the hollow.

One day, when the sun briefly broke through the clouds and I sat on the faintly trembling earth in front of the royal house, I asked a passing knight—who had helped me relieve the fortress—if he knew what had become of my black scholar's cloak. I had let it slip to the ground just before my injury; it must have been near the drainage channel where I had, quite unintentionally, apprehended the Inga. Perhaps the cloak had been found during the clean-up near the shattered galley. It was a rather irrational desire to want the cloak back, which I had thrown off during the nighttime battle thirty-two weeks before, but during that time I had been almost unconscious, and it didn't occur to me that all this had happened so long ago that surely no one would remember my cloak.

Yet the knight knew very well.

He replied that Herr Gerdung, the young knight of Acora, had taken the cloak. He himself, along with some other knights who had fought beside me, had declared me dead from a brain-piercing arrow shot, and so he had no qualms about taking the cloak. Gerdung had ridden off that very day—after the rescue of the fortress by my small force—dressed in Zipangu clothing and with his face stained, following the duke to Illimani to bring him the news of the recapture of Akapana and the rescue of Herr Framer, since I could no longer do so.

Why did he take my cloak, I asked.

"He saw you fall with the arrow in your brain, and I also saw you fall and lie motionless on your back during the battle," replied the knight calmly. "The missile stuck almost a hand and a half deep in your brain, as we could see from the remaining length of the arrow shaft, so we considered you hopelessly dead. That's why Herr Gerdung rode off and took your cloak to the Prince of Acora, though I don't think it was really for the prince, but for the noble lady Atlanta. We all knew that Godda Apacheta loved the daughter of the governor of Tiahusinju." At that, my head sank, weary and heavy, onto my chest, and I no longer answered the further questions the young knight asked, so that he finally left me, probably thinking that things looked very bad for the stargazer of Aztlan.

How bitterly I felt in that hour that my willpower was still paralyzed! How terribly the long sickbed must have gnawed at me, that I let my head drop so hopelessly. I had lost the game. As long as I lived, the Acora would not woo Atlanta.

Now Godda Apacheta was dead! And if he had risen from the dead, he would be an unwelcome guest in Atlantis, able to play only the ridiculous role of an unfortunate missing person, should he ever see Acora and his beloved again. At that time, I didn't yet have the vague hope that Herr Gerdung might not have reached the duke, or might have died on the way. After all, he was riding through rebellious country, and no one knew what things looked like in the Tiahusinju lowlands! But even that hope did not give me the drive I needed to search for Acora and Atlanta. Sick and poisoned was my soul, and again I drank the numbing coca.

Once, my mother told me that the sentries on the plateau had seen a huge star in the sky one night when the clouds cleared for a short time. And the star was like a white disc, almost perfectly round, but it seemed to be surrounded by a veil of mist.

I only nodded. For I had long known that Heldung-Atlanta was circling in the sky around the old Earth; after all, I had seen it myself and had stood with my own feet on its swaying, continent-sized ice sheets and climbed over its flood-mountains as if over triple ranges of mountains. And even though I knew that all of this had not been reality, the confirmation by the sentries that the new star now stood in gigantic size in the sky was not a surprising piece of news to me.

But since that time, my soul was no longer in Aztlan. It hurried over lands and seas, seeking the Acora and the beloved woman. The world sea passed by me in wide, silent waves, as I sailed alone on a ship east and west, searching for home, for the islands where golden Atlantis stood. And nowhere did I find it!

Boundless, the sea surged between Zimbabwe and Tiahusinju, but Atlantis I did not see. And again I thought, with a heavy heart, of the Acora's saying: "See that your life is long!"

Well, I had made sure that I overcame death, but I almost begrudged the old good mother for having given me life yet again, and at the same time I kissed her good old hand in remorse for such thoughts. And she smiled and looked at me, as I believe the Ancient One also smiles, to whom women are so close because they can give life to people just as he does.

One morning I stood in the bright sunlight at the parapet of the castle wall, gazing into the distance and searching for Atlanta with my soul. Then my old vigor flared up, which had lain dormant for so long in the sweet intoxication of coca leaves, and I knew that from now on I would bear the pain that still faintly stirred in my skull, but I would never again touch the cup that brought forgetfulness and silence into the tormented heart. I stretched my emaciated arms wide to the hazy distance, through which a weak sunbeam shot its white lance, and I sent my heart across the royal Andes, over mountain and lowland, to Atlantis, to my beloved.

"The Inga of Cuzco greets Godda Apacheta, the stargazer," I heard a voice behind me in poor Atlantian, and when I turned around, there stood, with his constant armed escort, the ruler of the Zipangus from the north of Tiahusinju before me. I was not surprised that the man addressed me, for since Herr Framer had granted him knightly captivity, we treated him like a captured king and not like a traitor who had broken hospitality and attacked his hosts. I thanked him for the greeting and returned it politely, but I quietly hoped he would be satisfied with that and move on with his warrior.

"Son of the Sun, you look to the east, where your homeland is," he began again after a while. Again, I had no desire to engage the Inga in conversation, and I remained silent, so he continued without waiting for a reply, saying that he advised me to leave soon, for Akapana would not be the safe haven for the Atlanteans much longer that it once had been. Already, the Cuzcos under the leadership of his sons had crossed the crossing Andes and were advancing over the lake and along both banks toward the city of Aztlan.

I looked at the man somewhat incredulously. If that was the case, then what reason did the enemy of the land have to tell me this?

The Inga saw my distrustful gaze and continued softly and insistently, saying he could speak without concern, since within a few hours the news would have reached Akapana anyway. I should turn my eyes north, toward the distant lake. There, Atlantean men were riding across the plain toward Akapana. They were the crews of Framer's last warships from Lake Tiahusinju. And since they

were returning, it was certain that they had lost their boats to the superior forces of the Cuzcos. There was still time to leave the fortress, without sword-blows and without losses. Later, that might no longer be the case, even though he hoped that his sons would allow the Children of the Sun to withdraw to Atlantis unscathed.

I replied to him with a smile, saying he must surely know that the sound of swords was dear and familiar to us, and that Aztlan belonged to the king in Atlantis, not to the Cuzcos. At that, the Inga pulled his yellow face into politely regretful folds and left.

But I peered with my good eye toward the north and saw the riders he had mentioned trotting in the distance over the dry mud of the former lakebed, and I went to the Count and told him of the conversation I had had with the Inga. The old man did not reply, and I knew it was not out of discourtesy, but rather because of the heavy burden of worry for the fate of the borderland.

It was only five knights and eight servants who arrived at Akapana after midday, leading their limping horses up the steep steps. Their report only confirmed the Inga's words, and the battered helmets and bleeding wounds proved that they had not given up their warboats willingly. They were the last men of Count Framer's small war fleet, which he had stubbornly rebuilt on the now so distant lake, and the Lord of Akapana did not ask about the other men, for he already knew the answer. So he only gave brief thanks for the report and had the men tended to.

I, however, could no longer ride away, even though I was a free man, bound only by duty to my friend. But now, in Akapana, every sword-arm would soon count for a hundredfold, and so I forced my longing back into my chest and stayed.

"You can go," Framer said curtly to me when evening came. "There's still time, and you promised Acora you would come to Atlantis as soon as possible." I replied that I would ride in a few weeks, as I still did not feel strong enough.

Then the Count cautiously looked around to make sure no one was nearby, and pulled me to his broad chest.

Shortly after, I heard his deep voice scolding by the granaries on the night-dark expanse of Akapana.

What Lord Framer did was folly. I knew it as well as Acora had known it—that the borderland could not be held by the handful of Atlanteans who had escaped disaster—but Framer was the governor of Tiahusinju, not I. If, later on, things turned out somewhat well, it was not the old hard-head's fault. And since

he wanted to stay, I stayed as well, against my better judgment, for a part of our noble foolishness is the fear of the appearance of fear, which knows no yielding until the last shield is shattered.

As misguided as this ambition was in this case—to not yield or waver from the borderland of Tiahusinju as long as there was still a single arm able to move—so right is it in the life of peoples who must fight for space and sunlight. This thousand-year-old tradition also slept in my blood, and it was only for this reason that I remained with Lord Framer. But again, the Ancient One meant well for his friend Godda Apacheta—I would later realize this with much regret—for if I had ridden alone to the lowlands with only a few knights, I never would have gotten a ship to search for Acora. At that time, however, I did not know what things were like in the governorship of the Riverlands in the low country of Tiahusinju, and I stayed out of northern stubbornness that rebels against the whole world, whether wise or not.

Thus it happened that already on one of the following nights, we marched north with nearly the entire garrison and attacked the enemy at dawn, even though such an undertaking against the countless thousands of yellow-brown fellows could almost be called hopeless. But the Count knew his opponent and their fear of the swords of the Sons of the Sun, and once again, he was proven right.

With almost no losses of our own, we routed a great army of well-equipped Cuzcos and had to chase away the prisoners, as we were repulsed by the idea of slaughtering simple soldiers who had surrendered. Nevertheless, victory turned into a hasty retreat, for a large number of Cuzco groups outflanked us on the sides and forced us to return to Akapana with all possible speed.

Thus, one day, the old fortress was surrounded from all sides, and it made little difference that we held the king of the besiegers in our power. The Cuzcos seemed to know that the Inga was alive and being held in knightly captivity in the fortress, for they were undoubtedly in contact with the mountain Zipangus who worked for us on the terraced slopes of the mountains. Nighttime sallies from the fortress were almost entirely unsuccessful, for the enemy would immediately flee when the first sword blows echoed through the darkness.

One morning I saw the smiling face of the Inga looking out the window of his cell and was annoyed that this man seemed to grin eternally. He nodded to me in a friendly manner and called out to me. Almost without meaning to, I stopped and asked what he wanted.

"I offer you safe passage with everything you wish to take with you," he said loudly.

I did not respond to this insolence and walked on, but in my heart I had to admit that this man rightly assessed the terrible situation in which we found ourselves. His Cuzcos, camped outside under the command of the Inga's sons, never accepted a real battle, because they knew we could not stray far from Akapana if we didn't want to be hopelessly cut off. Thus, the offer from the Prince of Cuzco could truly be called magnanimous, as much as my pride rebelled at having to admit it. If this state of half-war—at any rate, a war without any real fighting—continued, one day we, the last Atlanteans of the borderland of Tiahusinju, would have to make the difficult decision to cut a path eastward through the enemy with our women and children.

We could easily calculate how long the fortress's supplies would last. Lord Framer could hold out in Akapana for another year, but then the bitter end would come.

In conversation, I reported the Inga's proposal to the governor. Then the old man did something I had never heard from him: he uttered a wild curse and forbade me to negotiate with the Inga. Naturally, I kept silent about the unfair rebuke implied in his prohibition, if only because discipline during wartime does not allow for replies. Lord Framer stared into the distance as if he could break apart the royal Andes with his sharp gray eyes and see down into the lowlands, which had been silent and sent no news for over a year.

"The Acora promised me five armies from Egypt," he growled in despair. "They must come now—it's the last possible moment, otherwise we sit here at a lost post." I replied that conditions at home may have prevented the dispatch of troops. Since the disaster that had so devastatingly struck the borderland, all mail from home had stopped, and that could not be due solely to the destruction of the posthouses. Those could have been quickly repaired and restaffed from the governorship in the lowlands, if it had been possible. Not even the state express service, which used to deliver important news from Atlantis to Aztlan within fourteen days, had been reestablished. And the messengers whom the governor had sent to the lowlands had not returned. All this must have its reasons, and after what had happened in the highlands of Tiahusinju, the reasons were clear to me.

"The Acora keeps his promises," said the count, as if he hadn't listened at all.

"And the Lord of Akapana also tends to keep his word," I replied with a smile, though I knew that remark was not without danger.

At that, the old knight suddenly turned and fixed me with his magnificent eagle eyes so that I nearly faltered. What did I mean by that?

With due modesty, I reminded him of the arrangements with the Acora in the Kalasasaya shortly before the crown prince's departure for Atlantis, according to which the count was to send several thousand Zipangu porters to the coast of the Atlantic Ocean within half a year. Now a year had passed, and the count still had not sent them, and would now have to wait until the Inga's sons, who were camped outside Akapana with countless thousands of armed men, had gone home. Either, then, the Acora and the count were oath-breaking wretches, or both were still the honorable men who absolutely kept their word. If the latter was the case, then fate had broken their power, but not their honor, and thus nothing was truly lost.

At these words, the old lord was silent and turned away so as not to show his face. With his broad back to me, he stood with bowed head beneath the drifting clouds of his borderland, clouds behind which, for Lord Framer as well, his fate stood as a white shining disc in the sky, wandering about the earth as a new companion and as herald of a new age.

But we—and perhaps the Count felt it too—stood at the end of a bygone age, resisting the need to cross a new threshold that seemed to lead us into a hostile land, or at least a land unknown to us. Such steps are hard to take, and whoever fate compels to take them has a harder lot than those who wandered through calm days of eternal regularity, fighting only with men and familiar forces of nature, and not with a power such as Heldung-Atlanta.

Silently, we gazed down from the crown of the fortress. All around stood the villages of tents and clay huts of the Cuzcos, at a respectful distance, so that they looked like little points and cubes. Between them teemed yellow and brown folk, now the rulers of the land of Tiahusinju—except for this one place, Akapana, which, with women and children, held little more than a hundred people.

The borderland of golden Atlantis had grown small—so small that one could walk its perimeter in a few short spans of time without tiring. But at the threshold of the new era, an old count resisted his fate, which had now wrapped its strangling chain around him as well—a man who had never known retreat in his life, except when it served a new victory. Lord Framer was spoiled by a life of success, and now he had to realize that, even for him, there were things that must simply be!

"What am I to do!" burst suddenly with great difficulty from the knight's breast—and this cry was the most terrible thing I had ever heard from him, since I had known him; that he no longer knew what to do, that he asked for advice—even if it was only the question of a man in despair that required no answer.

Nevertheless, I said that he should give the order, and we would follow him. He turned and looked at me for a long time. Then a smile passed over the furrowed features of the old knight.

"Your soul is like that of the Acora," he said after a while. "I have often envied the duke for that, and now I envy you, Godda Apacheta. For you behaved as if you had not even seen my despair."

And as I awkwardly kept silent, he walked away with bowed head, as if fate pressed him down.

While he was still walking across the plaza of Akapana toward the houses on the east side, the ground swayed under a heavy earthquake, so that he stumbled and nearly fell. But his gray head immediately rose, and I saw how thoughtfully he gazed toward the camp of the Zipangus, where, due to the natural event, the usual panic broke out among the indigenous folk, as always happens when the evil spirits stir. Around the huts, people swarmed, rushing outside in fright.

I, too, saw the terror among the enemy and had the same thought as the Count—that such a nighttime earthquake could be used to break through to one of the Zipangu camps and burn it down.

But at the same time, I smiled. What would be the use? Quick successes could easily be gained under such circumstances. But would the losses on our side be worth the gain? Truly, we did not have a single man to spare in the fortress.

So the old man lowered his gray head and moved on, staggering across the rippling aftermath of the fading quake, which we had all grown accustomed to as an everyday occurrence, even though it always sent shudders through our limbs. We knew now that Akapana could withstand such forces, and for that reason, we no longer left our sleeping chambers at night when the underworld rumbled. Only the Inga of Cuzco had himself led outside by his guard each time, for he did not trust the solid buildings of the fortress.

Lord Framer did not pursue the idea of a night sortie during an earthquake, although I was certain he'd had the same thought as I did. From this, I saw that he had given up on forcing fortune with the sword. Day after day I saw the old man standing on the flat roof of his hall, gazing eastward toward the royal Andes, as if the Acora's army must finally appear—with fluttering blue banners and ranks of shining shields, company after company, and an endless line of marching armies flashing down the slopes of Illimani and snaking across the plain like a bronze serpent, to save the borderland, to relieve the tenacious little band on Akapana.

But the veiled distance was mercilessly silent; icy stillness crept over the towering peaks of the royal Andes and entered the freezing, desolate heart. A deathly silence lay upon the mountain barrier that separated us from home.

Week after week passed—long, heavy days of waiting and of lurking hope for aid that would never come. On the gray clay around the fortress, captive Zipangus plowed furrows for new fields, though we were horrified by the terrible fertilizer the ground contained. Seeds fell upon the buried city, and armed Atlanteans stood guard over the work. But far off, we saw the Cuzcos tending their fields on the terraced slopes of the mountains, so they too had no intention of abandoning the siege. Unfortunately, they did not disturb our activities—though we would have welcomed it, if only to hear the blades singing again.

A virtually friendly relationship had developed from this war, even if at a distance, and Lord Framer would grind his teeth with impatience whenever he saw how the enemy acted, or rather did not act. Large detachments of Cuzco warriors withdrew home and were replaced by others coming from the crossing Andes, but the Inga's sons always ensured that the besieging force outnumbered ours by many thousands. They apparently considered this absolutely necessary, and it was almost like a last tribute to us sixty combative Atlanteans of the borderland that the enemy deemed such a great host necessary to subdue us. With our few warriors, we could not have defended the mighty ring of the fortress Akapana if the Cuzco had attacked, for even the full garrison of five hundred men who had once held the fortress would barely have sufficed.

But the attack never came, and so all remained as it was. And the duke's armies from Egypt did not arrive.

One day I saw Framer having the war machines and catapults gathered on the plaza, and captive Zipangus wound tenfold chains around the supporting pillars of the halls in the royal building, in the governor's house, in the granaries and armories, binding them to the massive winches salvaged from the sunken galley Atakama. No one asked why he did this, but we all knew that the count had forced his proud heart to submit to the will of the Ancient One, who no longer wished Atlantis to rule the earth. The Inga of Cuzco still smiled at me from his window as I passed by—presumably, he had taken a liking to me since I arrested him as a ghost.

Once he asked me to request an audience with Lord Akapana. I did not deliver the message, as I had no desire to be reprimanded again, and so I recommended to the Inga that he address his wishes directly to the count.

He must have done so, for I was not surprised when Lord Framer soon gathered the knights in the hall of his house—which looked odd enough with its chained pillars—and announced that he would soon depart for the governorate

in the lowlands. The lords should prepare for departure. Before retreating—he pulled a painful grimace at this word, which he pronounced particularly loudly to torment himself—he would bring down the fortress with chains and winches. The captive Zipangus would march in the middle, as would the women and children. The Inga would accompany us to the border of the Tiahusinju Highlands, where he would be released. He had spoken with the Inga and sent a Zipangu to the Cuzcos to warn them against attacking the Atlanteans during the march.

The Inga's sons had assured us that they would let the children of the sun depart unharmed if their ruler was released at the border as promised. As the Atlanteans still needed the remaining captives as porters, the Inga's sons agreed to their release at a later time.

I watched the count out of the corner of my one good eye. He looked aged and broken, like a man whose life's work is collapsing. But none of us felt any different. Still, heads remained held high and proud—so strong are tradition and upbringing, and not least the noble blood of northern lineage, which even collapse cannot bring to its knees.

The ring of besieging Cuzcos opened to the southeast of the buried city. One morning, we saw that the huts and tents at the ruined outposts on the former isthmus were no longer standing. The enemy apparently grew impatient waiting for us to leave, and so seemed intent on showing us just how open the road home truly was.

Two years after the onset of the dreadful time of earthquakes and floods, the horizontal pulling winches of the stonemason Ruder Atakama accomplished what even the most terrible tremors had not been able to achieve—they tore the mighty pillars from their rigid joints. Clouds of dust shot up to the sky, the houses of the proud castle of the borderland Tiahusinju collapsed, and then the last bastion of the realm of Atlantis against the yellow Zipangus had fallen. The machines and war equipment that could not be taken along went up in blazing flames, and then the end had come.

Slowly, the procession of the last Atlanteans moved eastward across the buried city of Aztlan. The blue banner with the symbol of the sun fluttered beside the red-and-white of the House of Framer above gleaming swords and helmets. I too had now become a warrior again and bore my arms like everyone else.

With shield and sword pointed toward the enemy, the knights and squires walked at wide intervals to the right and left of the baggage train and the captive Zipangus. I myself rode at the head in almost royal solitude, and Lord Framer brought up the rear in the same isolation. The gaps between the individual sword-bearers were several hundred paces, but the missing hundreds

seemed to ride within these yawning spaces alongside us—in any case, I have never seen a scene of such grim determination, where, despite being so few in number, the men seemed ready to do the work of the absent hundreds should treacherous attack come.

But on the mountains the flags flew—those green field signs of the Inga of Cuzco, who was our prisoner—and, to my surprise, I saw the blue banners of the realm of Atlantis fluttering beside them. I laughed at this, for it made me think of my last journey to Apacheta, when I had honored the Inga with my green hunting shirt, and I would have liked to know what kind of blue banners those in the distance now were. Unfortunately, I never found out.

Smaller groups of unarmed Zipangus, who belonged to the city and the surrounding villages, sometimes stood by the roadside, holding their caps in their hands until we had passed by, and so we departed undefeated from the borderland of Tiahusinju—with heads held high and defiant hearts—and marched toward an unknown future that lurked beyond the royal Andes like a mocking grin.

There was an ugly pressure in my throat whenever I thought of my black scholar's cloak and of the knight Gerdung, who had brought it to my wife, Atlanta.

The dead Apacheta rode toward Atlantis.

Should he not have done better to ensure he did not live so long?

HOMECOMING

The new moon, Heldung-Atlanta, hung as a broad white crescent in the sky, high above me along the path of eclipses, and I gazed into its mysterious, iron-hardened features with those strange, circular eyes, and thought of how the Ancient One had shown me his wonders. Yet now I no longer knew whether I could believe what I had seen, when I flew through the clouds with an arrow in my eye and stood upon the new star. When I answered Lord Framer's question, saying this was the same star that had destroyed Aztlan, he smiled about the star-wise Godda Apacheta and shook his gray head, looked at me with pity perhaps, and asked why Heldung had grown so large, since before it had been but a small bright point.

What could I answer the old lord? I knew only with a soul filled with foreboding that the silent moon there in the black garden of the Ancient One had been our fate — but it was denied me to know the reasons and the force that star possessed, to shake the earth and heap up the waters as it pleased. So I remained silent and looked out across the Atlantic Sea, which lazily washed the coast of Tiahnsinju Lowland with long, flat waves, rolling with peaceful murmuring over the dark sand.

From the shipyard rang the last hammer blows of the builders, and soon the sound of labor faded; weary men passed by with axes slung over their shoulders, on their way home.

The nights of the hot lowlands were warm and languid.

How cool and sharp by contrast the thin air of Aztlan had swept down from the snow mountains — strong and harsh with its roaring storms, as befits men whose ancient home lies in the cool north of the Earth-star.

Now we sat at the wet threshold of golden Atlantis, but the sea surged over the rich cities that had flourished long, long ago along the coast. And it was said that Atlantis had already sunk beneath the waves more than four years ago, and that between the high continents of Tiahusinju and Zimbabuye now flowed the deep world-ocean. Many ships came to shore with broken masts, and the few Atlanteans who staggered ashore, starved and ruined, spoke of endless deserts of water where once the golden islands had shone in sunlight — easily reached in short voyages from isle to isle, from harbor to harbor. The route to the landwall of Zimbabuye had once been so simple to find that the eye rarely lost sight of some solid shore.

Often I had asked where the King and the Acora were, but no one knew. They said the King had perished on his voyage to Egypt when his galley went down, and that the Acora had set sail with his knights four years ago to seek

Atlantis — but since that time he had vanished, like so many others who had gone forth to find the golden islands. Even in the Mediterranean, beyond the straits of the Heaven-Bearer, the cities along the coasts had vanished, and nowhere could the old shorelines be recognized. One shipmaster had seen, in the still and transparent waters of the Mediterranean, a city lying upon the seabed near the coast in shallow depth. “Heldung-Atlanta must also have drawn up the waters there,” I thought; yet in the northern lands the rise of the flood seemed to have been less than in the lower latitudes where Atlantis had lain.

“The Duke will have gone to the Northland,” said Lord Framer, unwilling to lose heart.

I could not contradict him, for I knew that our friend had long intended to return to his ancient homeland, and Godda Apacheta, who was to have accompanied him, was dead. Thus it was indeed possible that the Acora had fulfilled his intent, and that we would find him no more within the bounds of the former realm. And he could well travel north alone, for no beloved woman waited for Godda Apacheta. The star-wise one had fallen — with an arrow in his brain he decayed upon the fortress of Akapana in distant Aztlan, and the years had effaced the mourning for husband and friend.

Why then did I feel the irresistible compulsion toward the blue distance? Why did I wish to seek the Acora? Why did my foolish heart drive me across the sea toward the beloved who wore the cloak of my dead friend?

“As long as you live, I will not marry Atlanta Framer,” I heard the soft words whisper across the sea waves into my listening soul. And anguish burned within me — the hope that Lord Gerdung had never reached the prince, that Atlanta still awaited my return!

At times my mother would fetch me from the shipyard when I lingered too long at my work, and she would look upon the old galley that our captive Zipangus had dug from the riverbank’s mud. Four years ago, the ship must have been driven upstream by the rising tide and later sunk and been covered by silt. Proudly it stood now upon its beams — the weathered yet still largely sound vessel of the King of Atlantis — showing us its shattered ribs like old rotten teeth, though already new, pale timbers gleamed between them, replaced through long and arduous labor.

But my mother did not remain long at the worksite; instead, she took my arm in hers and wandered with me beneath the palms of the southern land along the shore, until we came to the hut that was our humble dwelling. We had become modest, we Atlantean nobles, who once spent our happy days in gold and splendor when wealthy Atlantis was still our protector. Now we had calloused, hardened hands and furrowed faces, and even the good old hands of my mother showed small cracks from work she had never known before. The

noble lady spoke in her old, weak voice of Atlantis, saying that we would find it again and that Atlanta was surely waiting for me. I would also find the Acora—she said I only needed to have patience. One day, the ship would be finished, and then we would sail over to the golden islands, which surely could not have vanished, and once again live in father's beautiful house.

My heart ached when my mother spoke so. And again, I had to laugh when she quickly shifted to other subjects and was never satisfied that I went without a bandage over my ugly, torn eye socket. For the bandage was still more beautiful than the hollow where once a sharp eye had sat. Despite the bandage and my lean body, I was still, for my mother, a handsome knight, but it was just as well that she did not notice that the few young women no longer looked at me, but directed their desires toward the young noblemen from Tikina. The judgment of the girls was surely the better one. And when Lord Framer had paired up the last couples who still had Atlantean blood among us, I could again be considered valuable, but there was no one left who cared about such value.

The days were humid and hot, and the nights sultry. Work at the shipyard was only possible in the early morning hours and in the evening. We hammered at the galley until the sun burned too hot, and even the Lord of Akapana swung the axe, for the days were past when we nobles only bore weapons and did not also handle the tools of craftsmen.

The number of the last Atlanteans from the borderland of Tiahusinju had been terribly reduced by disease and deaths in battle, and if we had not had the valuable help of the willing Zipangus, we would never have lifted the ship out of the mud of the Silver River, let alone repaired it.

One morning, as we moved sluggishly—since the sun in the lower latitudes makes one sluggish and lazy—into the shade of the woods, we saw a galley rowing upstream on the Silver River. The ship's captain seemed unfamiliar with the channel and was very cautious. He too had seen that there were people working at the shipyard on shore, and he hoisted the blue flag of the Realm of Atlantis to show who he was.

At that, Lord Framer sobbed with joy. In the governorship of the Lowland, no one recognized the king's colors anymore, for the jungle had overgrown the silted cities and castles, and the blue sun-flag had vanished entirely from Tiahnsinju, so that only we, the last lords from the borderland of the Highlands, still bore it.

We forgot our fatigue and the oppressive heat and hurried to the shipyard to raise our banner, adding the red-and-white of Akapana and the black-and-white of Apacheta so that the ship's captain could see who stood before him.

Immediately the galley dropped anchor, swung into the current, and lay still on the river. For near the sea, the current was stronger than the wind, and this force came from the sea and shifted with the tides. I had only become familiar with this phenomenon by the sea after coming down from the highlands to the Atlantic shore. Before, the movement existed but was barely noticeable, and we had attributed it to the power of the sun, but it was not enough to counter the wind's force. Yet since Heldung-Atlanta had appeared in the sky, the current changed direction twice daily, rising several feet. I concluded that the new moon had this power to move the water, depending on its position relative to the earth, and I also attributed to this power the disaster that had befallen Atlantis. But since, during the years of disaster, the cloud- and smoke-covered sky had blocked all view into the realm of the sun, I could not prove this conviction by saying that I had seen Heldung-Atlanta linger near the green earth and now draw its waters up.

And who would believe Godda Apacheta if he had said that the Ancient One himself had led him to the new star?

And I could not believe what the others said: that the realm had sunk into the floods in a fateful night of earthquakes. Instead, I thought of the passage of the Wanderer a generation ago, when the waters first rose and only receded after the star had passed. And so I am still certain today that Atlantis did not sink beneath the waves due to an earthquake, but that Heldung-Atlanta moved the waters, and that it was the waters that covered the king's realm.

The captain of the ship on the Silver River was suspicious and seemed reluctant to come ashore. So I rowed over to the ship in a boat from our crippled galley—a boat as crippled as the galley itself—bailing water twice along the way before I could throw the line aboard.

When I stood on the clean deck of the Atlantean galley, tears came to my eyes and I could not hold them back. I gave the captain my name and learned that he had come from Egypt. There, the highland Abessens had driven out the Atlanteans after the water surged up the sacred Nile and destroyed the power of the King of Atlantis within a few hours. His galley had by chance been at sea when the disaster struck, so he had defied fate in stormy days at sea. But upon entering the greatly changed Nile, he was attacked by brown-skinned natives and was forced to land by fighting. Yet he could only hold out for a few weeks and then had to take to the sea again, taking water and provisions by force of arms. He had wanted to go to Atlantis and report what had happened to the king, but had not been able to, as he could not find the islands of the realm. So he went to the coast of the governorship of Zimbabuye, where he learned from Atlanteans that the king had gone down with his galley while fleeing the rising waters. The realm had sunk, but a few small remnants of islands remained, and on them ruled King Acora; this small group of islands was called the Acora Islands. But they were tiny, and no one knew their location, since the sea charts

were no longer accurate. Only once had a boat from that realm reached Zimbabuye, to buy timber for galley-building, but the men aboard soon died of exhaustion. And now, no one knew where the realm of the Acora could be found.

I asked whether he had not searched for the islands along the way, since he was coming from Zimbabuye, but he denied this and said he did not believe in the existence of the island group. He had crossed the Atlantic Sea back and forth, searching for the young king, but had found no land anywhere. However, his galley had become leaky from the long journey, so that the pumps had to be operated constantly, and thus he had to set his bow for Tiahusinju, as he hoped to find Atlanteans there. He had sailed south along the coast until he had spotted our shipyard at the mouth of the Silver River and, at the same time, the first people along the entire stretch of coast he had searched. Now he was glad to have met men of his own blood, so that at least he was not the last Atlantean sailing on the sea.

The ship's captain then asked if he could bring his galley onto our shipyard, and I answered him in the name of the Count of the Realm that I would gladly place the yard at his disposal; I would also give him several hundred Zipangu workers along with some carpentry tools, but I asked in return for some sailcloth, which our old galley either lacked or had that was spoiled. For we had had to dig the ship out of the mud of the Silver River. Furthermore, I asked him to commit to releasing the workers once his ship was repaired.

Since he accepted these terms, we brought his galley closer to shore and moored it so that we could fasten the anchor behind a strong tree; and when the tide went out, the ship lay dry.

Then I saw that the floor timbers had not been maintained for a long time and that they were badly damaged by worms. My secret hope of being able to trade the outwardly so sturdy-looking vessel for ours was thus dashed, for the Atlantean ship from Egypt also urgently needed a new bottom and probably some new ribs before it could put to sea again.

The captain was very saddened that, although we had some women among us, there were no young girls, for there were only men aboard the Egyptian galley. I suggested to the captain that, after repairing his ship, he sail to the Northlands, for there he would surely find enough girls of our race. We also intended to return to our old homeland. He replied that he would have no other choice, for the world had become empty of noble white people, and on every coast dark-skinned people grinned with wide mouths, making one long all the more for the Nordic homeland.

One evening, as we sat in front of the huts after work, I learned that my brother, who had been governor in Gondwana, had escaped in a galley to the east coast of Zimbabuye, but had fallen in battle with natives while making his

way across the mainland to the Atlantic sea. The captain had also learned this on the coast of the black people. There were still some isolated Atlantean groups by the sea there, but they too would have to perish if they did not decide to abandon the governorship of Zimbabuye. The realm was shattered, and soon Atlantis would only be spoken of around the campfires of the savages.

That sounded very disheartened, and I knew too that what the foreign ship's captain said was true, but in my heart, hope began to sprout that I might find the Acora, who was now my king, and I was determined to cross the Atlantic Sea with our galley, from north to south and from Zimbabuye to Tiahusinju, until I had found him, to whom my heart was bound. I deliberately avoided thoughts of Atlanta and believed that the Ancient One would show me the way so that I might do what was right. I was firmly resolved to bear even the heaviest burden and to keep silent if he had destroyed my love. It was not to become a sentimental spectacle; I would see to that—certainty was all I wanted, nothing more, for uncertainty gnawed agonizingly at my soul, and that could not go on. And if Atlanta was still waiting for me, I would go with her to the northern homeland; if not, then the old galley would carry me onward, and I would no longer care where. But I wanted to begin a new life and not despair, one way or the other, until the Ancient Friend and Brother stretched me upon the shield, as he had done for my brother.

The sailors of the Egyptian galley gladly joined in our work, if only because they wished to get their own ship onto the slipway as soon as possible. The work progressed briskly in this way, so that, by the beginning of the rainy season, our galley lay caulked and tarred on the Silver River, laden with the last riches of the golden age: gold from Framer's hall and gemstones from the royal hall of Akapana, amply supplied with salted meat, fresh and dried vegetables, and drinking water for a solar year. Only fifty people boarded the ship, and we had been a hundred when we left Aztlan.

The ship sat deep and solid in the water, for the precious cargo of noble and heavy metals lay at the keel and made the vessel stiff and seaworthy.

So, one day, we hoisted the blue banner of the realm above that of the governor of Tiahusinju, left the Silver River, and set sail with every sail to the northeast, to seek the Acora, who was now king of Atlantis and lord of a sunken realm.

The skill I had once practiced as a noble pastime—steering a galley and using the wind by setting the sails—now made me captain, and Lord Framer of Akapana learned many a trick and some star-lore from me, and was an eager student of the star-wise Godda Apacheta. Since I knew the lights of the sky as well as the fingers of my hand, the simple scholar grew in esteem among the companions day by day, for it made no difference to me whether the constellations shifted week by week, dipping beneath the horizon in the south

and new pearls of the sky rising in the north. In this respect, I was as confident as an old sailor used to sailing around the world, for I knew the latitudes and longitudes, and which constellations stood at their zenith over which regions, depending on the season and the sun's shifts to north or south.

I often said to Lord Framer, here we are sailing above Marajo, the fertile peninsula of Tiahusinju Lowland, and here the sea floods nearly a thousand feet above the old, rich land of the king. And here lay Gotburg, the great island with pastures, its black-and-white cattle, and its slender, swift horses. It must have been the first to be flooded, for it had never stood much above the Atlantic's surface and, a generation ago, had already once disappeared for a time during the passage of the star Heldung. And there in the northeast, there lay the low mountains and hills of proud Atlantis, the royal city on the royal island, great and mighty and mistress of the world—and now the long waves roll high above it and have covered what an age of the world had created.

At night, when the sky became cloudless, as it almost always did during the rainy season, Heldung-Atlanta shone brightly in the sky and, with its radiant white light, almost hindered the observation of the stars. But the great crescent became narrower and narrower and finally disappeared completely, so that Lord Framer believed the star had departed, as it had thirty years before. But I did not believe this, and I was proven right, for the moon appeared again as soon as it had freed itself from the rays of the sun, and began to wax until, like a shining disc, it rose from the sea in the east when the sun sank into the waves in the west.

All of this stirred me deeply, and I grew quiet and thoughtful, barely listening to the words of my mother, who often sat beside me at the tiller bar and spoke of Nordland and her joy at perhaps being able to die in the old homeland. But when she noticed that I was not listening, but letting my thoughts wander in the garden of the Ancient One, she would ask if I again had a "hair star" (comet) in my head, as so often. And I admitted that this time it had not been a comet, but Atlanta, and left open the question of whether I meant the star or the beloved lady knight. For the two were closely linked, at least for me.

I steered northeast toward the sunken Atlantis, but I did not find the island, as even its highest mountain peaks lay beneath the sea. Yet I thought now of the solar observatory, which had once been on Mount Acora in the north of the realm and perhaps was still there. This mountain, after which the heir to the throne was named, must have protruded from the flood, if the tales of the Egyptian ship's captain were true.

I had often stood on this mountain, when, after my duty in the observatory, I would look out for ships, which in those days were numerous upon the Atlantic Sea. And now it was so lonely and empty that we glided through the blue waves for two weeks without encountering a single vessel. But

the mountain I sought, and which probably still rose out of the floods even today, lay north of the Tropic of Cancer.

Therefore, I gave up searching for the island of Atlantis, which was certainly gone, turned the rudder toward Finkbord, and sailed with a steady west wind directly north. Night after night, I waited for the star of the northern celestial pole, which now had to rise soon from the waves. And when I saw it for the first time glimmer just above the horizon and recognized the Wagon (Ursa Major) circling around it, I knew that my course was correct and that in another two weeks I would have to begin tacking and sail only at night when the moon Heldung-Atlanta shone in clear air. For otherwise I ran the risk of sailing past such a small island without finding it in the darkness.

A stormy southwest wind hastened our progress northward, and I was very glad for it, as I saw how the long loneliness of the Atlantic's oceanic desert weighed on my companions' spirits and made them sullen and anxious. There was hardly anyone among them, except for the young noblemen born in the borderlands, who did not know seafaring from their own experience, but in earlier times the sea had been lively with ships, and now days and nights passed in dreadful solitude over the waves, and the earth seemed deserted, so that no ship crossed our path.

Lord Framer was content that the course always pointed north, and each day brought him closer to his homeland, where he had house and farm. Strangely, he never seemed to consider that his house could also have been destroyed by the flood or by earthquake, and I did not want to, nor could I, shake his faith, for I too was firmly convinced that the star Heldung-Atlanta had only drawn up the waters in the lower latitudes of Atlantis, but not in the northland. Rather, the opposite must have happened, for the mountain Acora in the north of the realm had apparently not been completely flooded, if the report of the Egyptian seaman was true. The fact that a coastal city had been seen underwater in the Mediterranean further confirmed my belief that farther north, the sea could not have risen, but rather must have fallen, for where else could all the water have come from that covered Atlantis as high as mountains? And that Framer's hall in Nordland should have fallen by earthquake I considered impossible, for houses there were built of wood, and solidly built wooden houses might bend under the waves of an earthquake, but in general did not break.

But all these thoughts I could not share with anyone, for I believe that none of them had a proper conception of the shape of our earth, which we scholars knew precisely, and so they would not have understood me.

Now my longing was twice as great for Atlanta and for Acora, the royal friend who could read my soul like a book and whom I understood without needing words.

Often, for many hours, we traveled through crunching lava that floated upon the sea. The dwellers below must have wrought terrible havoc here when Atlantis was flooded, and more than once I was tempted to agree with those who said Atlantis had sunk because the earthquake broke open the shell of the earth on which the islands had once stood. Then again, this view seemed childish to me, and I told myself that Heldung-Atlanta must possess the force to raise the waters, and the nearer he came to earth, the greater his power. And I smiled as I thought of my journey on the white, mist-enshrouded Wanderer, when he was bound to the earth, and how, with the terrible arrow in my eye, I flew past whirring white blocks toward Heldung-Atlanta, as though I myself were an arrow aiming to pierce that shining eye of the heavens.

Had the ancient friend merely teased me again when he showed me this, or had he shown me the truth?

If it was the truth, then the green earth must have gained a hundredfold capacity to move and raise water, for the tidal wave that raced around the rim of the new silver star was like a chain of triple-stacked, gigantic mountain ranges. It looked marvelous and wild to travel across them on a drifting raft and to glide down into the shimmering abyss like on a mighty swing.

Once, near morning, as I saw the ghostly streaks of the fleeting little lights we call shooting stars, a longing seized me to ride one of them around the green earth, to see what the Ancient One had done to it. For one thing was clear to me: earth and sea had become strange to me, and it would have been wonderful to draw a map of the new earth, as I had learned to do at the university in Atlantis for the old earth.

So far, the wind had been loyal to us, but now it died away. So knights and servants took to the oars and rowed like trained galley slaves, and Lord Framer of Akapana, instead of the golden marshal's staff of Tiahusinju, took up the wooden hammer and beat the rhythm for the rowers like a true galley master on the table of his command cabin, with the door open so that the sound would reach even the last rower. With a powerful voice, he commanded the reliefs from the deckhouse and the living quarters, and would leap, scolding, from his cabin if things did not move quickly enough; when he grew angry, he stayed outside and struck the hammer against one of the bronze shields we had hanging overboard, as was customary on warships. The blows rang out from the verdigris-covered metal over the lonely sea like the bright tone of a bell.

As I passed beneath the tropic of the northern sun, my heart beat fast. From then on, I would have to tack and search to see if I could find Acora and… my head sank onto the tiller bar, because in the distant drifting clouds I saw a white figure stretching its arms toward Godda Apacheta. No one had noticed, not even my mother, who sat beside me in the shadow of the lowered sail, so I

lifted my head again and forced my thoughts of Atlanta back into my chest, from which they had suddenly burst forth like wild, storming eagles.

At the helm stood the dead Apacheta, after all, and he is allowed no heart and no longing. If Lord Framer or one of the experienced sailors at the helm relieved me, I would fall asleep on deck, for I did not want to go down to the sleeping quarters, as if I feared missing the moment when the boy at the bow would announce land with a clear call. At night, I never let go of the tiller, no matter how angry Lord Framer became, for he would not tolerate my steering without relief. But I convinced him that only at night could I navigate the correct course by the stars and that I had to wait for each of the reliable lights to appear one after another to be sure. So he let me have my way, and I believe my companions placed great trust in my knowledge.

At first, we thought that time crept past us like an old, weary wanderer, but Lord Framer was amazed when I showed him the ship's log and he saw from it that we had been at sea for eight weeks since our departure from the Silver River. During all this time, not a single ship had crossed our path. The vast sea of Atlantis was deserted and as lonely as a silent grave in the desert. And it was a grave over which we glided with rushing keel—a grave of hundreds of thousands, a grave of the golden realm of Atlantis and its glory.

Now I no longer steered north, but tacked back and forth in the same area, always two days' journey east and two days west, and my good eye ached from searching for land. Besides the young man at the bow, I had sent another up the mast, where he made himself comfortable in the crow's nest and had only one task: to scan the horizon in a wide circle for land. And though day after day passed, I did not lose faith, for I knew quite well where the old solar observatory on Mount Acora lay, and it certainly hadn't floated away if the mountain had held.

By day I bent over the map of old Atlantis, which I had received from the Egyptian sailor—we had no other, of course—and at night I took the bearings of the stars. So my certainty grew that I must find the islands of the Acorans, unless unknown currents had shifted the ship. For it was clear to me that the currents and speeds marked on the old map were no longer valid since the sea had covered the Atlantean islands.

On the fifty-eighth night, Heldung-Atlanta stood as a thin crescent in the sky, and it was so dark that I was about to have the sails taken in, to drift that night and make no progress—when suddenly the tip of the crescent-shaped night star broke off, crumbled further and further, and vanished, much too early for the moon to have dipped below the horizon.

But a bright, delicate gleam remained in the sky, and at first I thought my star had slipped behind a cloud, but then I realized that sharp peaks stood far

off before the pale glow—peaks that did not shift like clouds but stood hard and fixed, as if nailed to the sky. Then my heart pounded wildly in my chest, then halted, and then began to race, as if it had suddenly become young again and was experiencing an immense joy and an equally great pain at the same time.

Gently I leaned my body against the tiller bar, so that it creaked softly, and steered toward the northwest, where the dark shadow stood. With one hand, I hauled in the main sheet of the sail, so as not to disturb anyone from sleep before I was quite sure I had not made a mistake. Now the moon, like a floating boat, crept out again from behind the peaks and shone with silvery narrow stripes across the breathing surface of the sea.

Again I let my friend Heldung-Atlanta crawl behind his peaks and come forth once more.

Then I knew enough!

No one else had seen the land. The young men on watch might have seen the moon disappear, but would have thought it merely hid behind a bank of clouds. No call rang out from the crow's nest or the bow. Silently, the ship lay asleep—only Godda Apacheta wrestled with himself at the helm of the galley, and felt despair at the thought of how the reunion would be!

Of course, I could not know whether I would find Acora on this island, but as I passed by in the sickle-light of the star of fate, I had examined the peaks and compared them with my memory of how the mountain summit had once looked, when as a young student of astronomy I sailed to the solar observatory at Acora and saw the towering mountain from afar. And I felt, with an unshakeable certainty, that on that island Acora lived, and that beside him...

Why do I speak to the stars of things that none of them will ever reveal, even if someone were to come and cut my tales of the downfall of Atlantis from the silver arc of the sky and tell them to his friends?

Keep this one thing to yourselves, you countless points of light in the shimmering band—betray not Godda Apacheta's soul! That is why I have given you my love, you twinkling stars of the universe, because you know how to keep secrets as no man on green earth ever could. And with full trust I send the lament of a tortured heart up to you. Guard it well!

Like sharp claws, my thoughts clung to the island that Heldung-Atlanta had shown me, and even though I could not see it anymore after the swift disappearance of the narrow crescent, I still knew where it lay and slipped with rippling bow-water toward the northwest. The swell pushed the galley onward, so that the running waves swirled around the rudder and rushed brightly under the bow; the wingbeats of a night bird clapped against the mast, and I noticed

how the man in the crow's nest came alive and listened to the sound of those wings, as if he could not believe that there could be a living creature on the sea other than the last Atlanteans on Framer's ship.

I smiled at this restlessness, for the lookout in the basket scented land without seeing it. With a pounding heart I waited for the shrill call from mast or bow, but it remained quiet and the movement in the basket died away. The hope was too small to find the island land of the Acorans, which the foolish Godda Apacheta sought with such stubborn patience.

Slowly the night crept over the sea and turned toward morning; then at last I saw the shadow of the boy on the mast rise up high. It was so quiet that I thought I could hear his excited breathing and the gulping sounds that escaped his throat before he could decide to call down to the silent, sleeping ship the discovery he still could not quite believe.

Then I clearly heard how his lungs drew in breath for a shout, and how his cry rang out through the awakening morning that there was land to port ahead!

I had come in well, and through the night I had kept up our progress despite the light wind, so that the steep cone of Mount Acora now rose high out of the waves, still faint like a greenish-gray mirage, but solid and immovable. As swiftly as daylight tends to come in our warm lands, the first rays of the rising sun shot like flickering ribbons across the horizon to starboard, and before the startled ship could rub the sleep from its eyes, the mountaintop shone bright in the first light of dawn.

The last Atlanteans of the borderland Tiahusinju stood in silence before the miracle, in which—except for my old mother—none of them had truly believed, and I felt a human vanity, perhaps not justified, for the chance of passing by such a small island without seeing it was very great.

But like a magnetic mountain, the island of Acora had drawn the galley to it, and not by even half a point had the course been wrong. And had I not found the island, I would have tacked up and down the known latitude north of the Tropic of Cancer until I found it! And I hurled the spear of my soul up to the summit of the glowing mountain and laughed in gratitude to the Ancient One, who somewhere out there in his garden stood and rejoiced over Godda Apacheta, his one-eyed friend.

Smoke rose on the steep coast.

Those on the island quickly saw that a galley was sailing close along the shore. Peering, I steered nearer to the island, and the sounding line kept reporting no bottom could be found. This did not surprise me, for the mountain

was very steep, and two hundred paces from the shore our line could no longer reach the bottom. Only on the eastern side, where the solar observatory had once been, did the mountain once slope more gently, so I steered that way, hoping perhaps to find a harbor that might have formed there.

But I did not find the harbor; the water stood much higher than I had believed, and the observatory was sunk and likely lay deep beneath the surface of the world-sea. But on the eastern side, I saw a number of low stone houses and a shipyard, on which lay a large galley. Many people stood on the shore, waving white cloths, and their voices could be heard carrying across the water. A blue flag waved on a short pole on a hill, and with joyful delight I recognized it as the banner of the realm, flying here on a lonely island.

I had the sails lowered, and Framer beat the drum for the rowers. So we glided in calm water against the light morning wind to the shore of the last kingdom, which had arisen from the ruins of golden Atlantis on the isles of the Acorans.

In bright sunshine, the keel of the galley slowly ran up onto the narrow beach, close to the shipyard and not far from the settlement. I bent my body low over the tiller bar, unseen by all my companions who crowded joyfully at the bow, and saw Acora standing there, and beside him Atlanta, and at her hand a boy.

Atlanta wore a black cloak to protect against the morning chill, and my heart stopped when I saw the cloak. The fabric had been good, but I had not believed it would last five years.

Acora did not wait for us seafarers to come ashore, but lifted Atlanta—carrying her through the water in his arms—up onto the deck, and fetched the boy, handing him up as well to Lord Framer. Then he quickly swung himself over the side and stood before his gray count of the realm, and remained silent in deep emotion.

I saw how Lord Framer struggled for words, and all that came from his old lips was a touching official announcement, that the borderland could no longer be held, and that he was reporting back to his lord and king with the last knights and servants.

The Duke wore the golden circlet with a diamond sun symbol, and Atlanta, too, had in her hair the insignia of royal dignity as a diadem. I saw all this quickly from my sheltered position at the rudder. Dully and from afar, I heard Acora—no, he was now the king—replying to Lord of Akapana, but I did not understand the words, for before me stood a slender boy of four years who looked up at me with bright, shining eyes, examining me. But I gripped the rudder bar with both hands, as if I had to weather a storm, because I dared not

pull my child to my heart, as the urge to do so was nearly overwhelming. The little fellow was already wearing the diadem of Acora of the realm upon his brow! And my one sharp eye grew dim, for it filled with tears beyond my control.

"What is your name?" I asked in a hoarse voice, just to say something, because the little man was already growing anxious since I had been silent so long.

Then came a delicate, sweet little voice, which nonetheless cut straight to my heart, and he said his name was Godda and that he was the Acora of Atlantis, and that up front on the ship stood his mother, the queen.

And he turned around, ran back, and called out with his clear, unconcerned voice, "Mother, there at the helm stands a big man, he has only one eye, and with it he is crying!"

Now, for all my sorrow, I almost wanted to laugh, for the little man tugged at his mother's hand and did not stop pulling until she, half annoyed, followed the child. Many eyes followed her, and the king too raised his head for a moment with attention and smiled as the little Acora led his mother to the spot that, for a tiny Northlands knight, is the most wonderful—the helmsman's station.

I felt as though I had no right to stand there, but Atlanta came toward me, step by step, like fate itself, and I hunched together and glanced awkwardly to the side, not knowing where to look. I hated myself, because I hate all spectacles from the bottom of my soul, and I feared this would become a spectacle. Yet it was too late, and once it had to happen—that we would meet again, Atlanta and her husband, the star-wise Godda Apacheta.

So I fixed my eye on the beloved knightly woman, who was now my queen, and my gaze fell upon the embroidery of her cloak, which hung old and worn about her beautiful shoulders.

And the sun played with a colorful, shifting glow in the fire of three large pearls that were set in the embroidery, and they were the pearls I once lost to Atlanta on Akapana when I drew her into my arms during the earthquake. This was perhaps the hardest moment of my life, but I mastered my will and bowed my head before her, because she was the queen, and wanted to say something, but I could not, for my voice suddenly would not obey. Yet before the silence became dreadful, I heard the beloved voice say the words that plunged me into blooming abysses: "My dearest, why have you come so late?"

Yet I immediately recognized the danger, as if a flash of lightning had illuminated my soul. Here I had lost, and the king was in the right. The dead do not rise again.

So I replied that it had been difficult to leave Aztlan, and that I had not been able to hurry as much as I had wished, and I asked the lady queen to forget the past.

In this way, I saved much—or at least as much as could be saved—and our composure did not betray us.

I saw the king crossing the faded deck of the galley and heard his carefree and happy laughter, because he had been reunited with his count of the realm, his father, and the last Atlantean people from the borderland of Tiahusinju in his small kingdom; I saw him standing with my old mother and kissing her hand, and saw his sudden shock when the lady pointed to the helm, where I stood motionless and upright with Atlanta and my son.

And I asked the queen with a gesture to let me pass by her, and I went to the king and reported back from Aztlan. Then the friend reeled and reached for support, only briefly, and no one but me may have noticed, and I saw with deep pain how his eyes sought the queen, who stood at the stern turned away, looking into the distance with the chattering boy.

I begged forgiveness for greeting the little Acora first, but I considered it only right and proper, for I had sought the Acora, not the king. And I asked, after greeting the Acora, to offer him my homage as king.

When I said this, a strange shimmer appeared in the king's magnificent eyes. He drew me to his broad chest and said I was welcome in his small kingdom, and now we would soon travel to Nordland, as we had promised before we parted at Illimani. Though it had taken a very long time, it was not too late for such a journey.

"Five years you have been dead, Godda Apacheta. That is a long time. Yet time and death tear people apart, and much has happened that cannot be undone," the friend concluded in a soft voice.

I saw Lord Framer's astonished eyes, so I replied that nothing could be more wonderful than that, after so many years, we had found the king and queen again, and that the realm had an heir to the throne. This, I said, was the best wind for the last knights from Aztlan, and I hoped that no one wished for anything better.

Our eyes met and lingered. I realized that the king understood me. A quiet sorrow lay in his eyes, for he knew I would not travel to Nordland with him.

Thus was the wall raised that separated us all from the past, and the hardest part seemed to me to have been endured at last.

When I saw the slender little figure of my boy walking beside his mother toward the bow, to go ashore again, I heard the fine childish voice ask why the poor helmsman had only one eye. And as all the people hurried toward the land, calling out to friends and relatives waiting on the shore, I buried myself beside the tiller bar in the folds of the lowered sail and hid from the gaze of the people. And I did not know that the king came once more onto the ship, stepped up to the helm, and looked down at me. Only my mother was with him, and he soon slipped away again on silent soles to join the others.

But my mother sat down, without me noticing, on the coil of rope beside the sail, and waited to see if she could comfort her child. Perhaps she also knew that here, any comfort would fail; in any case, she never spoke to me later about Atlanta being queen, and only much later did she tell me that the friend had come to me once more at the helm and then immediately left again.

For a long time I lay at the tiller, unseen by all the people who had no business with my pain, and listened within my chest, where something had broken, and I knew that it was the bond of last hope, which the ancient friend had shattered for me. Now I had the certainty I had longed for these five years like a man dying of thirst. But in my ears, sweetly and cruelly, echoed the fine child's voice, speaking of the poor helmsman and why he had only one eye. That voice stayed with me, and I could not forget it.

The king sent for me, so that I would take part in an inspection of the old great galley lying on the slipway. After all, he said, I had become an expert in the meantime.

With this ship, Acora had arrived on the island four years ago, and it had been just in time that he found land, for the vessel could not have survived at sea much longer—it was decayed and eaten by shipworms. Since there was no usable timber on the islands—neither on ours nor on the neighboring ones belonging to the Acoran group—the king's shipwrights had tried to seal the old planks with precious silver, hammering it into plates, but the attempt had to be abandoned, as the small treasury was soon exhausted of precious metal.

The prince had also sent a boat to Zimbabuye, as I had already learned from the Egyptian sailor, to obtain a galley with timber, but the boat had never returned, nor had any galley with wood arrived. I was able to inform the lord that this boat had, in fact, reached Zimbabuye, but the men in it soon died of

exhaustion. Through them, we had received the news—the only news at all—that the Duke of Acora sat as king on the Acoran Islands.

Since restoring the king's galley was out of the question without timber, attempts were soon given up, and the king had to content himself, by necessity, with small trade by boat between his few islands, on which—except for his own—only natives lived. These had been able to save themselves on the highest mountains during the flooding of the realm of Atlantis. Two Nordic women, who had also managed to escape, had since died.

The inspection of the rotten galley revealed that, even with our more abundant resources from Aztlan, it could not be made seaworthy again, and that instead, the ship of Count Framer—the one we had arrived with—should be hauled up onto the slipway. The still-usable wood from the old galley could serve to repair our vessel. For it too, after the long journey, was no longer in a condition fit for a voyage to Nordland—or rather, only for the others, for I did not intend to go along.

The departure for Nordland was to be undertaken as soon as possible once the galley was repaired, if only because of the difficulties involved in procuring provisions. The realm of Atlantis had become very poor and small, so that it could barely manage to feed just over a hundred knights and servants with their wives and children. Even the royal palace no longer resembled the golden castle of Atlantis. Built from rough stones, it offered only a faint reflection of former splendor in its interior fittings. And we no longer had a Ruder Atakama, who could devote his skill to the king's service.

With the king's approval, I myself built a small stone house high on the summit of Mount Acora, and Lord Framer's servants kindly helped me, so that my mother and I could move into the new home within a short time. I had the foundations for an extension laid right away, so I could continue building later, for I intended not to travel with the king to Nordland, but to remain on the island.

When I told my friend of my decision—which he had already read in my eyes when we stood face-to-face on the galley—he looked at me for a long time with his bright, intelligent eyes and said he well understood my reasons, though it was hard for him to leave his friend alone on the island.

I replied that I would not be alone, since, besides the natives, some Atlantean servants with their wives wished to remain, and perhaps it would be good if I, as governor of the Acora Islands, held the islands—if only to show any arriving Atlantean galleys the way to Nordland, to the homeland, along the route the king had taken.

"Godda Apacheta wants to become governor," smiled the friend, but quickly grew serious again. He said that sometimes it is a heavy guilt when

those thought dead come back to life, and he knew why I did not wish to go with them and understood it. The tangled knot had become insoluble, and it was painful that friends had trampled on each other's happiness, without meaning to. For his own happiness too was past, and now he must ensure that the name of the king reached Nordland, clear and unblemished. Therefore, he would not object if I wished to stay, for any objection would be an unworthy lie. For if I came along, the queen would suffer most—that the father of her child must stand like a stranger beside the king's house, a beggar for love, where he should have been her prodigal. He did not wish to speak of the pride of the count, who now saw his life's wish fulfilled, that his last child was queen of the sunken realm, even if this realm now rested on the loyalty of only a few noble people. No one knew that little Godda was not the son of Acora, and so it should remain—that the child of the distant, star-wise Apacheta would one day wear the impoverished crown that, just half a decade before, had almost shone across the whole earth.

"And when I have set foot in Nordland, I will send you a galley," concluded the friend. "Then I will dissolve the last governorship in old Atlantis, and you will return to your friend and king. By then we will be older—and wiser."

So it happened that Lord Framer had to doubt the clear judgment of his royal son, when, at a council of all the Atlantean nobles, the departure for Nordland was set for the day of the northern spring equinox, so as to arrive in the homeland in high summer. Up to this point, the count could be well satisfied with the king's arrangements, but what followed caused quite some commotion, if not outrage. Of course, the knights accepted the lord's new orders in silence, but many sympathetic eyes were directed at my gaunt figure, and to the pity for my disfigured appearance was added the pain of the king's command, which seemed very harsh to all.

"I do not intend to give up the little realm of the Acora Islands, the last part of once-mighty Atlantis," the lord continued, with an unmoved voice. "Therefore, I appoint the knight Godda Apacheta as governor of the Acora Islands. He will hold this office for ten years. Further instructions will be given to the knight in a personal meeting with me. From Nordland I will try to establish contact with the governorship of Acora across the sea as soon as possible."

After these words, an icy silence prevailed, and the king asked me whether I was prepared to accept the office. And as our eyes met, earnest and deep, I replied that I would serve the king wherever he commanded, and I would try to preserve the Acora Islands for the crown, as far as the modest means left to me would allow.

Then Lord Framer of Akapana, with a hoarse voice from excitement, requested to be excused, as he suddenly felt unwell; and that was a rather strong gesture, but I believe the old count truly had taken ill.

I will never forget the king's abysmally deep eyes as he nodded to his father and dismissed him. How crushed stood the last knighthood of the realm before the stern king, who did not wish to give up these meager islands where not even enough grain grew for a hundred people. But no word was raised to bring forth any serious arguments against the order, since I myself had accepted the appointment without hesitation.

What the queen said about my friend's decision, I do not know, and it was just as well that I did not, for it was impossible for me to see my beloved and to hear my boy's voice without my heart twitching in bitter torment.

Like a hermit, I lived with my faithful old mother on the quiet mountain height, and the woman who had looked forward to finding her eternal rest in the northern homeland remained with me without complaint, and did not ask why the king treated me so harshly. Probably, however, she knew the reasons quite well, but she did not speak to me about Atlanta or my heavy sorrow. She knew that she could pull an arrow from her son's eye, but that to attempt to pull the arrow from his heart would not succeed. And she pretended to look forward to our solitude on the beautiful, quiet island of Acora, praised the splendid air on the summit where we lived like eagles in the Andes, and believed it would be wonderful to administer such a small governorship.

And when I, full of emotion and love, embraced her—for she was old, and one could not treat her as one would a young woman—she would lay her white head upon my breast and gently stroke my hair with her delicate hand, and say nothing more, because she knew she was understood.

"Do not go down to the shore when the king sails for Nordland," she once pleaded with me, full of heartfelt fear, as the day of the equinox drew near. But I only smiled at her and replied that I did not see why I should not, for the governor must bid farewell to his king, and also to the lady queen, and to all the lords and servants who would go with them. She need not worry. The king would send a galley in a few years, and then contact with the northern homeland would be established.

So we both told each other things we did not believe, to try to heal our hearts, which had become very sore.

When the day of the spring equinox arrived, I put on my somewhat shabby tunic of arms, donned my helmet, and went down to the shore to say farewell. My mother came with me, staring silently at the narrow footpath ahead, and she spoke not a word the entire time. But she did not keep silent out of

exhaustion from the oppressive sultriness that already weighed on the island early in the morning, but out of bitter fear of parting.

I knew, however, that my hard upbringing excluded any failure of composure, and that I was firm and strong enough to bear even the last pain that the Ancient One now gave me in saying farewell to wife and son.

The king embraced me and said I should not forget him. Then he turned away briefly and went aboard the ship. I was grateful that he said no more, although I noticed the astonished looks of the Atlantean lords, who understood the king's severity less and less. They may have thought the one-eyed governor deserved a few more kind words.

But the queen came toward me, wrapped in my cloak, with the boy Godda at her hand, and I walked a few steps to meet her and wished her a good journey. A pained, heart-rending smile trembled on her lips as she offered her hand for me to kiss, and as I quietly and composedly bent over that white, slender hand that had bestowed upon my life the golden shimmer of happiness, I heard her faint, faltering voice speak the last words of love: "Let me keep your cloak with the beautiful pearls, Godda Apacheta. It keeps me warm, and I have often needed it. You don't know how often I have been cold, and I think this journey to Nordland will be cold as well."

I had feared her voice, and now it happened that I could not answer at first, but finally managed to utter only the foolish words that the lady queen should keep the cloak. In the warm air of the Acoran islands I would not need it. But the three pearls should keep the image of Apacheta from fading too quickly.

My boy stretched his arms up to me and placed his small hands on my cheeks, gently stroking the empty eye socket of the poor helmsman with tender compassion. I did not dare to touch the boy, because I knew that then the composure of the star-wise one would be over. So I stood rigidly upright, my neck stiff, and once more saw the silent eyes of the king resting on me and the queen with deep sorrow.

Then the count came and laid his old head on my shoulder, and from his chest came a low, growling sound that must have been meant as a farewell.

Then they all came, the knights and lords of Atlantis, Aztlan, and Tikina, and gave me their hands, so that I was almost glad when the galley pushed off from the shore and drifted out to sea.

The sails climbed up the mast, and with a rush the ship which I had guided for many weeks to the islands of the Acorans glided northward into the light of the bright day.

I saw Atlanta standing at the stern beside the king, arms outstretched, and I too stretched out my arms, silent and in deep agony. My vision blurred so that I could see nothing; the waves of the sea rose up over me like blue veils, but I still stood firmly on my feet, though island and sea seemed to spin around me. Yet then my knees began to tremble and I would have fallen forward into the sand, had not a young, strong arm suddenly supported me.

That touch brought me back to myself. My knees became pleasantly steady again and I turned to see the kindly helper. Beside me stood a young knight I knew. And I smiled in full understanding and slipped my arm under his, and so we stood together—the mother, the star-wise one, and the young knight—on the shore, watching the king's ship glide away into the distance.

But the knight was Lord Gerdung, who had brought Atlanta my cloak.

It was a hard road I had to climb to my dwelling, for the day was oppressively humid, and my willpower had suddenly weakened, so that I was glad when I finally reached the summit. With open eyes I lay on my bed and sent my soul out to the ancient friend, to tell him of my sorrow. And he was kind to me and wiped the memory of the dreadful present from my heart.

From the summit of my mountain, the arrow of my longing shot into the blue, sunlit velvet of the Atlantean sky, and I saw the earth lying beneath me like a sharply drawn new sea chart. From the hot, sultry midday air I pushed up into the cold, thin ether, seeking the Ancient One, though I knew that even this time I would not find him.

Whirring, I saw the glittering blocks of the shooting stars circle the green earth, near and far, and their house-sized, jagged bodies gleamed in the lances of sunlight like gigantic diamonds.

There they were—the magnificent white steeds of the heavens, darting so quickly around the ball of the earth, seeing all that happens on its surface; and on many a night I had seen them flash over the black backdrop of the ether-dome and wished that I could travel with them, all around the old homeland.

And now the longing seized me twice as strongly, for the earth had changed since Heldung-Atlanta had strangled it, and desire drove me to know what I did not yet know; so my thought flew after a nimble block, whizzing through the thin ether, and I laughed because I was faster than the white companion. I stretched out my hand, and as I caught the Wanderer, a spark shot out, bright and crackling, hissing and haunting my soul with electric flames. But I did not let go, and pulled myself up in jubilant joy that he could not frighten me with his ghostly fire. For a long time I stretched out on the back of the ice-armored steed and shot around the old earth like a gleaming lance.

Beneath me, the Atlantic sea surged, and I saw the sunken islands slumbering in the depths and recognized the golden roofs of the towering royal castle beneath a blue shroud of death. The land of Zimbabuye arched its broad back from the flood, and the mighty mountains of Abyssinia rose up to me, solid and stark, and I saw the land of Sumer, Ur in Chaldea, which Lord Framer had conquered, but yellow clay shone where once green meadows had been. The rich land lay dead and buried—the king's borderland against Asia.

There, to the right, had not Gondwana lain there, which my brother once governed? But only surging sea slipped over sunken islands, and Gondwana was no more.

Over Zipangu I sped, in far Asia—the motherland of the Cuzcos in Tiahusinju; empty was the sea, which once teemed with ships bringing soft silk to the king from that distant land. And the great world-sea gleamed, covering half the earth as far as the searching eye could reach. How the white runner sped across the lonely waters! He drew nearer with a mysterious pull, and I shot right over Tiahusinju, the borderland of Framer, for which I had fought so long. Gray death-color covered the highland, as I knew it from dark times, and across the royal Andes I sped, hearing the pressure of the earthly air roaring around my cool temples.

Then the Atlantic sea flashed in the distance like a blue ribbon! Swiftly the ride sped along the icy block, and before and behind me I had shining companions flying with me, crackling with cold fire.

Behold, Godda Apacheta! There sails a ship! Alone it travels northward across the desert, and the blue banner and the sun symbol wave proudly from the mast that I myself had carved.

Onward, I want to see it—the last ship of the last Atlanteans, sailing home!

With a roar my steed plunges downward and breathes heavily in the resisting pressure of the dense living air. With a crash it shatters beneath me, like thin shells, one after another, and icy shivers swirl—torn off by hot friction—around the cold block, so that swelling cloud-balls tower around me like black specters.

But we are fast, my steed and I, always in the lead, and our vision is clear!

How the little ship grows with the storm's speed, grows larger with every heartbeat! And it bends into the waves and races away as if hunted, fleeing before the soul of Godda Apacheta!

Friend Acora, haul in the sails, strike three courses across, for Apacheta comes on the wings of the storm and with a flaming soul, to seek the beloved, the wife, the mother!

Give me back my boy, King! Give me the boy and let me keep my wife!

Wild the hail-cloud howls around me through the heavens; flames shoot out, sparking and roaring, from my burning soul, the thunder of my call echoes far and wide. I plunge deeper, swift as the condor of the king's mountains upon the flock.

There she stands at the mast, the one I have sought for so many long years, and whom I lost because Godda Apacheta was dead.

Atlanta, look here! I live, I live!

Atlanta, I am coming to you. The soul blazes, heavy was all that friendship and love forced me to forgo. Now it is enough! The soul burns with agony!

Atlanta, I am coming!

She calls for me; shrill she calls my name up into the clouds—Godda Apacheta!

I see how she spreads her arms toward the black cloud, how far she stretches her arms for her beloved, who comes riding in the fiery chariot of the sky. The storm of my soul howls before me.

There is the mast with the realm's fluttering banner! Down I plunge in a terrible rush and fall with crackling flames upon the beloved—Atlanta, Atlanta!—

Thunder crashed shatteringly in my ears, and I jolted awake from my bed, where my mother sat holding my hand in hers.

"It's nothing, my Godda," she said softly and stroked my hair with a gentle hand. "A thunderstorm is passing over the sea."

"I have killed her," I replied tonelessly.

My mother shook her head. She did not know what I meant. Whom had I killed? she asked with a smile.

I answered softly that I had killed Atlanta Framer.

She stroked me again and said I was her poor child, and that I should lie quietly on my back, for the suffering of the last days had been great and I needed to rest. I obeyed and covered my face with both hands, for I had killed the beloved with my love.

"Don't be a fool, Godda," begged the old woman. "Atlanta is far away, she sails over the sea to Nordland, and all day long the galley has been sailing and is long since gone from sight."

What did mother know of how fast Godda Apacheta could fall from the sky with a fiery lance and on a white steed—what was half a day's journey for the galley compared to the speed of the star-wise one when he hurled his soul through the clouds?

I got up, full of unrest, and climbed the few steps to the summit of the mountain, to which my house clung like a bird's nest. The sea was empty, the king's ship had vanished, and in the distance I saw white waves dancing; but black clouds moved gloomily northward, and far off, thunder grumbled softly over the blue expanse of the Atlantic.

How quiet my soul had become since I killed Atlanta. I smiled at the fool Apacheta. Mother had known better. Atlanta and the galley were far away, and the king's governor sat alone on Mount Acora, waiting until he had grown older—and wiser.

I lay on my back and looked into the blue evening sky, which here above the wide world-sea was like a true bell, transparent and hard at the same time, and I looked forward to the night because then the stars of my ancient brother would begin to sparkle—distant worlds without the sorrows of earth.

I told mother that I wanted to stay outdoors that night, and carried my bed out onto the summit.

But the next morning, mother came out of the hut very early to look for me, and found me picking flowers on the slopes, which here at the beginning of spring bloomed in rich abundance. When she saw the large heap of already picked flowers, she asked for whom I was gathering them. Smiling, I pointed north toward the sea, and when mother followed the direction with her eyes, she saw, as I did, in the distance a ship with a slanted, broken mast steering toward the island, and through the solemn silence of the morning rang out the hard hammer-blows of Lord Framer of Akapana for the rowers' work.

"What are you going to do with the flowers?" mother asked again, and a terrible fear was reflected in her good old face. One could clearly see that the blue banner of the royal house was flying halfway up the shattered mast.

"I have gathered them for the lady queen," I replied with a smile, as if a great happiness had befallen me. Then the poor woman withdrew into the hut before me, and I believe, on this radiant spring morning, she was afraid of her own son.

I gave the flowers to my servant and asked him to carry them into the king's hall, and gave him the key for Lord Gerdung, who lived on the shore, so that he could open it first. And I had the knight told that I would come down shortly and that he should wait for me.

Then I managed to persuade mother to come with me to the harbor to receive the king's galley, which after a short voyage was returning again to Acora, and together we went down after I had put on my tunic of arms and helmet and hung my sword at my belt.

But in the king's house, together with Lord Gerdung, I carried Atlanta's bed into the hall, placed it in the middle, and covered it with my blue banner, which I carried as governor of the Acorans. Mother helped me, without asking, to adorn the bier with flowers. And we had just finished when the galley came up onto the shore.

With the gathered servants and natives I received my royal lord and friend, who stood at the bow holding a silent woman in his arms.

And I saw that the queen was dead.

Then I stretched out my arms and took the beloved from my friend's hands and carried her into the hall.

On the banner of the realm of Atlantis, and on the flowers I had picked as a last greeting for my wife, lay the lovely queen of my heart, smiling in her sleep. Her pale lips were half open, and with my soul I heard her last call. Godda Apacheta!

As her white arms bore traces of burns, I covered her body with a white cloth and placed roses around her slender blond head. Nothing else mattered to me—neither the quiet footsteps of the Atlanteans nor the presence of the king, of which mother whispered to me. With my love I had killed the only woman of my life; the fate of the star Heldung-Atlanta had been fulfilled, and I bore it with joyful calm and quiet happiness, for the lips of the dead still whispered, Godda Apacheta! Godda Apacheta! Then I felt a small hand groping for me, and a fine little voice asked, "Poor helmsman, is my mother dead?"

I looked down at the little blond crown and up at the uplifted face and thought how clever the boy was, always calling me a poor helmsman. For the Ancient One had left me bloodless, had shattered Godda Apacheta's love and

happiness with mighty blows, but now I knew it had to be so. The old was past. He wanted to make me anew! The last bridge connecting me to the thousand-year-old empire of Atlantis fell under his heavy strokes, and he had placed the fiery bolt in my hand so I could finish what he had begun.

I took my boy's hand and told him softly that his mother was not dead, she lived on, for the Ancient One had not been able to overcome us. Atlanta's noble blood lived and would not perish. That was said in an unchildlike and obscure way, I knew, but the little one looked into my bowed face full of trust, as if he had understood all that the poor helmsman told him.

I heard the hall behind me empty out. The last quiet footsteps echoed toward the door. The king must have signaled that he wished to be alone with me.

I felt a hard sword-arm on my shoulder. There stood my friend beside me, gazing in deep thought at the lovely face of the dead queen.

"She called your name, Godda Apacheta, when the lightning struck her," said the lord after a long time, as if this were perfectly natural.

"I jumped down from the mast and killed your queen," I replied without emotion, for it now seemed to me that it could not have happened any other way.

"She stretched her outspread arms high toward you, happy man of the stars," the friend continued. "A jubilant cry with your name echoed across the ship, and then the mast shattered, and a fiery blaze leapt furiously down upon her, struck the bronze shields along the sides, and disappeared into the water. When the crashing thunder had died away and I let go of the helm to run to Atlanta, I found the queen lying stretched out beside the mast, and she smiled, as if she were seeing great happiness. Then I knew that you had slain her, Godda Apacheta. You tell me nothing new, and never has the king's soul understood the friend faster than today. Now a poor crown-bearer stands beside you and begs for your love, you rich man. One day Acora Godda will also not call you the poor helmsman anymore, when he is grown, for you shall be his teacher. — Godda Apacheta, let me have the king's son. I had to leave you the queen, though I wished to carry her off. So let me have the boy, Godda, so that I too may have a share in your happiness."

Then my soul soared up, and I saw as if in a flash of lightning that I had always been the rich man, always, and that my royal friend had suffered as only a noble man can suffer—silently and with pride. And since we were alone, I knelt before my king and wrapped my arms around my child.

"I will be the faithful teacher of your boy, King," I said firmly.

"Rise, Godda," said the lord. "Look, I will stand at the door so you can kiss your Atlanta once more. I helped you once before on Illimani. Do you remember? Can a king do more than thank you for leaving me the heir to the throne?"

With that, he took little Acora by the hand and went outside. I remained alone with the queen.

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A golden coffin stood between the mast and rudder of the galley—a coffin that I had hammered and cast together with the knights and servants from the treasure of Aztlan. And we had sealed it with pure gold and screwed the feet to the deck planks, so that it would have a firm hold in the swell of the world-sea. In the coffin slept the queen of Atlantis, whom we were taking to Nordland to be buried in the soil of her homeland.

There stood the last king of the realm at the helm, steering the last ship of the Atlantean nobility to Nordland, and his friend Godda Apacheta sat at the stern with the boy Acora Godda and listened as the king spoke. He told how he had followed the course of the new moon since it became visible and had seen that in one solar year it waxed and waned twelve times. Did I still think of the old mysterious sun gate in Aztlan, which Ruder Atakama had erected for the solstice festival? There, the twelve moons were depicted, even though such a moon had not previously existed.

I smiled at this unfruitful wisdom, for I too had followed the moon's path according to my diary for two solar years and had likewise come to the number twelve in a year.

"That does not solve the riddle," I added. "How did the sculptor know in advance that there would one day be years with twelve moons?"

At this, the king fell silent.

I looked down at my cloak, which I wore again, and it had grown quite old, as I had myself. And when I looked at the king, I also had to notice the gray hairs blowing around his temples, and yet he was still young in years, like his one-eyed friend.

The Ancient One had not spared us his mighty blows, and they had not passed us by without leaving wounds.

Yet he had had to let us go undefeated—the old count with the white head, the king, and me as well—and he had shaken and scourged each of us, and yet still had to leave us the helm.

He had not been able to overcome even my silent queen. She was slain by me, not by my brother in the universe.

And the bridges he shattered behind us?

We will build them anew!

Your ancient Nordic line triumphantly crosses the threshold of the new age. Will it be harder than the one whose end we witnessed?

Grant that it will be harder, Ancient One, noble brother of the Nordic race! Can you restrain the soul when it rushes to cold heights? You will be proud and laugh that you could not overcome your own soul!

You had to leave us the last ship and the last royal helmsman. Now give us further distances, steeper heights, send us new, prouder goals! See to it that the struggle does not die out, nor the clash of swords, nor the striving of the soul for the giant summits.

Truly, we are now weary and worn out from struggle. Therefore, we return for a little while to the source, to the Nordic homeland, from which the stream of noble men wells forth across the earth.

End

AFTERWORD
by HANS WOLFGANG BEHM

About half a century has passed since that Georg Ebers, then at the peak of his artistic productivity, bestowed upon us his immortal novels. The world of antiquity, above all ancient Egypt, emerges before us in vividly painted colors, especially since the author of these works, alongside his achievements as a scholar, possessed an imagination that set his pen alight.

When Ebers attempted to bring the essence of the world's oldest cultures closer to the public, this attempt was entirely in keeping with the body of knowledge then available to historical and antiquarian research. The scholarship, which sought out ancient cultures moving along high paths, remained limited to a perspective of only a few millennia. It was primarily the ancient cultures along the plains of great rivers, such as the Nile, the Euphrates, or the Tigris, that altogether filled the “antiquity” of world history. Whatever might possibly lie hidden behind them in the gray mists of prehistory remained virtually closed off.

And even though, since the turn of the century, the young science of humanity’s prehistory has constantly brought new discoveries and surprises, and even though today it measures the age of humanity in many tens of thousands of years, it has nonetheless remained more or less restricted to comparing the primeval conditions of humanity at best with those of our present-day “primitive” peoples. Indeed, even this research into humanity’s prehistory sometimes credits our Stone Age ancestors with high levels of inner experience and intellectual stirrings. On the whole, however, it still stands at the very beginning of the endeavor to assert, with growing certainty, the existence of high cultures on earth that are tens of thousands of years old.

Although research in antiquity, prehistory, and earth science here overlaps and touches upon one another, there is still little clarity in the essential questions and interpretations of such long-lost and sunken cultures. That they once existed is now beyond doubt, since fortunate discoveries and excavations of recent times can be recorded, and clever attempts to unravel legend and myth have also had a significant word to say.

That possible interpretations of prehistoric high cultures are, despite all, still granted a relatively wide scope (one need only think of the entire field of Atlantis research), has several causes. For one thing, all research in this area is still quite virgin pioneering work. For another, there is some confusion even within the natural sciences themselves, which are to be drawn upon for the secure interpretation of ancient high cultures. For it is an open secret that the

accepted findings, methods, and approaches for deciphering a history of the world, the earth, and life are proving to be increasingly inadequate—or have long since been proven so.

Rather, one recognizes that the course of earth's history since the distant past was evidently subject to a grand rhythmic process, that the earth alternately experienced times of calm and balance, and times of heightened upheaval and great flooding. And in connection with this, one inevitably encounters the fact that there are forces from without, from the cosmos, which have dictated and continue to dictate the changing fate of the earth. An insight that, at present, becomes most clear and transparent in the comprehensive view provided by the incomparable World Ice Theory.[5]

Just as Ebers drew the material for his novels from historically attested ancient cultures, Edmund Kiß makes use of perspectives from this World Ice Theory, which without a doubt seem best suited to shedding light on the darkness of long-vanished cultures. And just as Ebers, as a research traveler, scholar, and poet, was creatively active in all these roles, the same applies in every respect to the author of this present novel. As a scientifically trained and practically active architect, he traveled the Peruvian-Bolivian highlands (Altiplano) around Lake Titicaca, after already becoming thoroughly familiar with the curiously uncertain and enigmatic research findings concerning the once flourishing high cultures in this region.

Many years of studying the World Ice Theory had, quite understandably, given the impetus for this. And when Kiß came to the conviction that the World Ice Theory provided him with the most useful key to unlock the secrets of the ancient American cultures, his observations on the Altiplano only confirmed this. Astonishingly grand perspectives opened up to him—ones for which there is not space to discuss here, especially since, apart from a few journal articles, the technical findings have yet to be published. Nonetheless, Kiß has woven much of this into the present work, and has taken the liberty of dressing the most ancient events of a spiritually, economically, and culturally highly gifted humanity in the light, engaging form of a suspenseful narrative. Such an attempt deserves special attention, if only because the material underlying it is not just entertaining and instructive, but remains fairly unknown to a wide audience.

It falls to me to present some essential characteristics of this material in the sense of research, to provide the reader with a reasonably rounded picture of

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[5] Cf. my works on this subject: "World Ice and World Development" (Guide to Hörbiger's World Ice Theory); — "World Ice Theory" (Its Significance in the Cultural Image of the Present); — "From Flood to Flood"; — "Hörbiger's World Ice Theory" (A Popular Outline of Glacial Cosmogony); "Hörbiger, A Destiny" (Biography); — "Creation of Man" (Revolution Regarding Charles Darwin and His Legacy). Furthermore, the recently published German-language work "The World Riddles Solved" by J. E. Emerson. All works published by Koehler & Amelang, Leipzig.

the earth and human conditions of that time, and to add clarifications where necessary.

The novel places us not only in a distant past, but also in an epoch of earth's history that reveals a transition—accompanied by catastrophes—into another terrestrial environment. And during this transition, the fate is fulfilled, so to speak, of a once widespread and highly civilized people, from whom the novel's hero, Godda Apacheta, is descended. A shattering calamity befalls the then-dominant flowering of humanity on earth, which claims as its victim also the actual motherland of all then-existing culture—namely, Atlantis.

Expressed in the scientific terms of the World Ice Theory, this catastrophic change in the state of the earth's surface signifies the transition from a moonless epoch to an epoch with a moon. That is, to that period in which we, the present, still live today, for now and into the distant (but limited) future, our moon orbits the earth as its satellite and accordingly influences it (e.g., ebb and flow of tides). Prior to this moon epoch, which has already lasted many thousands of years, there existed the last moonless age—that is, the earth had no moon, and humanity therefore did not know such a celestial body. Our present moon still held a higher rank within our solar system at that time, and was socially equal to the earth, for it still orbited the sun as a planet, similar to the earth.

A condition that the World Ice Theory is easily able to derive from the history of the formation of the solar system. In this, the moonless era represents a period of rest for the earth, comparable to a long-lasting pause for recuperation, during which the earth's body and its surface are spared from major catastrophes and all living things can develop less perilously and more serenely.

Without question, humans also experienced this last moonless age, which gave them the assurance to rise to great possibilities of development and cultural achievement. It is a time that has been preserved in the treasure-house of humanity's memory, and it very likely corresponds to the much-praised Golden Age of the Ancients. A time in which, according to reports from various historians of antiquity, the so-called Proselenes, that is, the "pre-lunar" people (from the Greek Selene = moon), existed. For example, Aristotle states in his Constitution of the Arcadians that the barbarians living in Arcadia were driven out by later Arcadians—people who lived before the moon appeared in the sky and who were therefore called Proselenes. Another source speaks of aboriginal inhabitants of Egypt who lived before the moon. Again, there are allusions in the myths of many peoples of the earth to humans of a pre-lunar era, or to the first appearance of a moon in the sky.

At any rate, scientific interpretations of earth's history and the preservation of myths (with careful separation of what is purely poetic from what is manifest reality) lead to the conviction that our moon, at a certain time,

was forced to give up its planetary independence. The reason for this lies in the insight of the World Ice Theory that every celestial body in our solar system is subject to certain laws of orbital contraction, since it does not travel in absolutely empty space, but in a "resisting medium." The consequence is that this medium (hydrogen in space, in the finest conceivable dispersion) must exert a braking and orbit-shrinking effect on any celestial body orbiting another.

Just as the earth is drawn toward the sun, our moon, once upon a time, likewise shrank toward our daystar as long as it orbited the sun as an independent planet (Luna). But with a much smaller mass than the earth, this more rapidly contracting Luna ultimately had to fall into the earth's gravitational field—that is, the earth disrupted Luna from its independent planetary orbit and, as it were, compelled it, like an insect drawn to a lantern's light at night, to circle the earth from then on. That such a capture of the moon by the earth—which marks the end of a moonless era and the beginning of a lunar age—must have involved all sorts of occurrences should not be surprising, as now suddenly two celestial bodies act against and upon each other. I will soon speak more about this, for the present novel takes place at the time of the last capture of the moon.

But it would detract from the overall understanding of the novel's subject if I did not first touch upon another very essential matter. For this novel also occasionally speaks of things, from the standpoint of earth history, that reach beyond this last pre-lunar or moonless era—as, for example, can be gathered from the conversations of the astronomers of Aztlan. Kiß allows these scholars of the distant past to exchange thoughts and speculations about their own most remote ancestors. And finally, it has not been by accident that I have so far spoken of a last lunar age or a last moonless age. The earth must therefore have experienced several lunar ages and several moonless periods, which, always within the framework of the World Ice Theory, is in fact the case. And this continual alternation between lunar and moonless ages is precisely what brings about the aforementioned geohistorical rhythm. In this, it is, of course, always a different moon; the earth, therefore, must have already had several moons, each of which in turn it forced into service as a satellite and then, as a result of the compulsion to contract, brought down to itself (moon downfall!).

Measured on a cosmic scale, we today still live quite near the beginning of a lunar era, which began with the capture of our present moon—an event equivalent to the end of the last moonless era. But even this last moonless era, seen retrospectively from the standpoint of earth history, was itself limited. It began when a predecessor of our current moon fell to earth, after having previously unleashed that great catastrophic event on earth, which, similarly, still awaits humanity in the future at the hands of our present moon.

As tempting as it would be to describe here this most impactful part of a lunar era in earth history, I must refrain, since these matters do not directly

touch on the content of the present novel. I only wish to note that the gradual approach of a moon to the earth unleashes truly unparalleled forces, leads to a fundamentally different distribution of land and sea than today, drives floods of scarcely imaginable power across the earth, results in mountain building, and prepares the basis for later coal formation, until finally, after the moon's disintegration, among other things, the waters previously dammed toward the equator by the earth come rushing over the planet as an actual deluge. All of this is discussed in my works listed in the preceding footnote.

Incidentally, Kiß himself based the final part of such an earth-catastrophe era, caused by the predecessor of our present moon, on his novel "Das gläserne Meer" ("The Glassy Sea," published last year in Leipzig, also by Koehler & Amelang). And in the afterword found there, the reader will find, similarly to here, the most necessary explanations. Perhaps it is not superfluous to point out that this novel offers a recommended complement to the present work. For it is the author’s endeavor to use several corresponding novels to shed light on the equally fascinating and surprisingly new perspectives of earth-formation and prehistory research.

After this brief, condensed presentation of the chronicle of earth history, the last moonless era has become a clear and definite concept for us. Even if the novel treats only the end of this era and the capture of our present moon as it was taking place, it nevertheless repeatedly reveals just how truly blessed this last span of time without a moon was for humanity.

A mighty Atlantean island empire, whose ruling elite were of Nordic origin, then extended across the Atlantic Ocean, making use of the eastern and western continents and establishing extensive colonial empires there. For even the main setting of the novel, in the South American Andes around Lake Titicaca, can only be understood as a colony of the Atlantean motherland. This, in fact, corresponds to the latest views of those Atlantis and prehistory researchers who consider Atlantis to have been a former island continent that once rose from the Atlantic. And who in turn see the nobility of humanity spreading out from Atlantis across the globe—as, for example, Herman Wirth demands from a comparative investigation of the cultic symbolism of the West in connection with the origin of writing systems. In any case, it seems to be confirmed that the closest relationships exist between the oldest Western, African (one need only think of the material compiled by Leo Frobenius), and American ancient cultures, all of which are based on a common Atlantean hearth. One which is to be properly seen in that island realm already mentioned by the ancient Plato.

Quite wrongly, this account of Plato’s—unique as a legacy of pre-Christian antiquity—was, as a rule, regarded as a fantastical fable. But recently, a change in attitude has occurred, and the relevant research fields now make an effort to interpret the reality underlying this account. People are beginning to

realize that a report which connects with already quite well-known geographical ideas of the ancients should not simply be taken as a fable.

In two of his dialogues, the "Timaeus" and the "Critias," Plato—known to us as both a brilliant and trustworthy thinker of the fourth century BC—famously acquaints us with the Atlantis tradition. He presents what Egyptian priests at Sais had entrusted to the Greek Solon some six hundred years before our era began.

Solon learned not only of a vanished, eight- to nine-thousand-year-old flowering of his own nation, which appeared to be essentially kindred to ancient Egypt, but also of the attempt by an island empire to subjugate all of Europe and Asia from the Atlantic sea. Nor was it concealed from him that this so-called Atlantis empire had already extended its power beyond Libya and European Tyrrhenia. If the island of Atlantis, lying “before the pillars of Heracles” (i.e., the Strait of Gibraltar), exceeded in size both Asia Minor and Libya combined, then it would have been possible from there not only to reach countless neighboring islands but also the opposing continent (America). In the attempt by the Atlanteans to attack a millennia-distant primal culture of the Hellenes, nature is said to have played a cruel trick. Enormous earthquakes and floods wore down both conquerors and defenders, and “in the course of a single dire day and night,” the island of Atlantis (around nine thousand years before Plato’s time) disappeared into the sea. The Timaeus dialogue of Plato presents this fate of a geographically most impressively described Atlantis in a very succinct manner.

Wherever the surf gnawed at the shores for thousands of years over the course of the earth’s history, traces of it remained behind as so-called strandlines. This means that the geologist can reconstruct former sea levels from such strandlines. Today, for example, we can observe strandlines in polar regions that are more than 1,000 meters above the current seashore, allowing us to conclude that in earlier times the sea level there stood higher by that amount. But if we go further and further south, this figure decreases more and more, finally dropping to zero, and between about 40 degrees latitude and the equator, it even reverses. At the mouths of a number of rivers in the equatorial zone, furrows have been found that, down to considerable ocean depths, essentially continue the course of the rivers themselves. For instance, the Congo River already shows, 20 nautical miles inland from its present mouth, the extraordinary depth of 274 meters, and the undersea trench can be traced nearly 100 nautical miles out to sea, at a depth of 1,830 meters, as a steep and broadly carved channel.

Since no river is capable of carving such a steep channel under the sea, and at most only creates moderately deep trenches through its delta before flowing into the ocean, this undersea Congo trench proves nothing other than that the now-submerged portion of the Congo riverbed once lay above sea level. Or, which is to say the same thing, the sea level in the equatorial regions must have been significantly lower in those times. Thus, the old strandlines in the

north and the undersea channels stretching toward the equator show that a shift in sea level must have taken place: the northern latitudes were drained, allowing land to emerge, while in more southern latitudes, the sea rose and flooded previously emergent land areas.

Atlantis, as a once-extended island realm of the Atlantic Ocean, fell victim to this displacement of ocean waters—a fact supported by the latest deep-sea soundings in the Atlantic, which allow for the reconstruction of sunken land masses, even entire mountain ranges, at not excessive ocean depths. And, again, precisely where, according to the old Platonic account and the interpretation of the World Ice Theory, we would expect to find Atlantis. And it is, once again, only the World Ice Theory that can convincingly clarify the cause of this oceanic flood displacement. That this latest shift in ocean waters is relatively recent in geological terms has become clear to earth historians as well. All the more futile, however, have been their efforts to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of its causes. Which is not surprising, since the transition from a moonless era to a lunar era has remained completely hidden from them. Our good moon is to blame for the downfall of Atlantis—it was during the settling of its orbit around the Earth, during its capture by Earth, that this tremendous displacement of ocean waters took place.

Even though I must here refrain from providing celestial-mechanical and mathematical-physical derivations for the moon's capture and the now immense tidal forces the moon exerts on the earth, it still seems necessary to highlight a few essential points. The reader will be all the more grateful, for only then will many sections and phenomena treated in the novel become fully transparent.

As with every significant event, there was a prelude to the beginning of the moon's capture. Even before this was fully completed—that is, before Luna's path in the sky was compelled around the Earth—Luna must have appeared quite striking to humanity of that time. All the more so to an astronomer like Apacheta, who was well-acquainted with observations from his ancient American observatory at Kalasasaya in recent years. For every few years, the Earth would catch up with Luna, which orbited the Sun more slowly than the Earth, and this state (opposition) would occur, in which the Earth was positioned between the Sun and Luna. Luna would then reach its closest point to the Earth, and for several weeks, the precursors of a mutual exchange of forces between Earth and Luna would begin to manifest. Volcanic eruptions and earthquakes would increase on Earth, and a noticeable shift in the ocean waters would begin to take place. Low-lying tropical land areas would become flooded, and a general sense of impending catastrophe would dominate large parts of humanity.

With each such opposition, this strange lunar body increased in size and had become, by then, a planetary disk about the size of a dinner plate—a "great shining star" as described in the novel. At last, the final and greatest

approach came, now with a surprising further increase in Luna's apparent size, accompanied by violent earthquakes, severe shaking of the earth's surface, the bursting forth of inland waters, and an intensified accumulation of water masses at the equator. All of these phenomena, which Kiß has rendered with enough clarity in the novel, prepared the way for the destruction of Atlantis, instilled terror in the people of the Andean highlands, and left only the brave undaunted. When the cosmic moment of the actual lunar capture was finally fulfilled—Luna seized by the gravity of the Earth and compelled to orbit it—not only was Atlantis swept away by storm and flood (as the heir to the Atlantean throne and, ultimately, Godda Apacheta would only later realize), but the old American colonial realm of the Atlanteans on the Altiplano also experienced those days of terror so vividly depicted by Kiß.

Just like two racecars, where the smaller outer one overtakes the larger inner one by a fraction, at the moment of capture, Earth and Moon were both still orbiting the Sun. But now, the smaller one no longer had the strength to continue racing independently; instead, bound by the invisible forces of the larger, it was swung ahead by the latter. While in reality this should have led to a collision of the two, we now imagine the larger one continuing to rush forward, and the smaller one being caught up in this motion, continually orbiting the larger. Initially, this was as a stretched ellipse, whose major axis, as it circled the Earth more and more, became ever smaller—that is, the ellipse rounded out and became more like a circle, eventually taking the shape of the Moon's current orbit. Of course, this adjustment to the present lunar orbit did not occur overnight, but rather took several centuries, if not a few millennia. In any case, the catastrophes associated with the Moon's capture had long since ended by the time the current orbit was approximately achieved.

Before I continue my explanations—considering the events associated with the capture as they occurred on the Moon itself (which the novel also hints at), and before I turn to the prehistoric sites of the Altiplano, the main setting of the novel, and discuss other matters—permit me to add a few remarks on orbital shrinkage. I do so because it is often objected that such shrinkage cannot be proven, and thus a lunar capture could never have taken place.

Already several decades ago, the creators of the well-known and continually updated astronomical work "Wonders of the Sky," Littrow and Weiss, stated that the very distribution of light throughout space shows that this space cannot be completely empty, but rather must be filled with matter, however exceedingly fine. In the case of the compact planets, the resistance such a medium poses to their motion would not yet be noticeable, but it can be shown mathematically that, because of such a resisting medium, the major axis—and thus the orbital period around the Sun—must always become smaller, and the body must eventually be absorbed by the Sun.

Among leading professional astronomers, it was especially the now-deceased American professor J. T. See who astutely defended the view that the moons of planets are cosmic bodies that were cast into their respective orbits by the planets themselves—which, he argued, also applies to the Earth's present moon. Many professional astronomers have agreed with his assertion that the action of a resisting medium on a body orbiting the Sun—or a moon orbiting a planet—must lead to orbital shrinkage, which for anyone knowledgeable in mechanics is unquestionable. In almost all essential points concerning celestial mechanics in this respect, See was essentially a pioneer of the Welteislehre (World Ice Theory).

In general, scholars concerned with questions of world formation have repeatedly come to similar views; I need only mention the work of university lecturer Ludwig Zehnder, which, among other things, treats the entire problem of lunar approach to Earth and describes all the stages that occur from lunar capture up to its eventual fall. We see from this, in any case, that one does not necessarily need the "world ice" itself in this context to independently, and without reference to Hanns Hörbiger, the creator of the Welteislehre, consider a lunar approach to Earth as entirely plausible.

Very tellingly, eight years ago, the rocket researcher Max Valier—who tragically lost his life in 1930—already outlined the numerous difficulties surrounding the whole question of orbital shrinkage, which make it understandable that science still allows for a certain latitude of opinion on the matter. The only means to prove shrinkage would consist in a precise monitoring of the Moon’s orbit in the sky. If the Earth were alone with the Moon in an immeasurably large space free from other celestial bodies, it would be relatively easy to monitor the Moon’s course strictly, aside from a whole series of resulting mathematical difficulties. But since there are also the other planets, which exert a certain influence on the Earth and the Moon, the formulas involved would become so intricate that they could hardly be written on a square meter of paper. Nevertheless, the proof of lunar approach seems to have been given, since various mathematicians have repeatedly concluded that the Moon arrives at a certain point in its orbit a little earlier (by two to eight seconds) than it should, after accounting for all factors, over the course of a hundred years. This amount of early arrival (acceleration) could, admittedly, also be explained by the fact that the Earth’s rotation itself is not constant over long periods, but continually slows down slightly. Even so, this effect would be too small to eliminate the acceleration altogether. Kepler’s laws also state that the closer the Moon comes to us, the faster it must revolve.

Again, the more recent measurements of the Moon’s orbit are still too recent to allow a proper examination of the acceleration question. Even relying on ancient eclipse reports has provided only insufficient data. *“Nevertheless, recalculation of historical solar eclipses has shown that these can only be correctly represented if one assumes that either the Earth is now rotating more*

slowly on its axis than it did in the past, or that the Moon now orbits more quickly than before. We do not wish to argue between these two views, but from the cosmotechnical (world-ice) standpoint, we must say that the narrowing of the Earth's orbit around the Sun must also have caused a change in the length of the year. The true acceleration of the Moon's orbit, as measured by an absolutely accurate clock, can thus, in some cases, be a multiple of the apparent acceleration."

It is already interesting to note that, especially in America, scholars who deal with this subject have recently been emphasizing all the difficulties that arise here. Professor Brown of Yale University, who made no fewer than 340 observations over the course of 1927, writes that the rotation of the Earth is our clock for determining time. If we wished, we could also use the Moon or any other body of the solar system as a clock. But the comparison of the Earth with other celestial bodies has shown that one of these clocks is always "wrong," and further observations have shown that the Earth's rotation, as a timekeeping instrument, is by no means always free from changes. Even a pronounced opponent of the World Ice Theory, like the German cosmologist Friedrich Nölke, has recently conceded that foreign celestial bodies can be captured by planets and retained as their moons. This concession is at least noteworthy. However, according to Nölke, such captures are supposed to be only exceptions. Why this should be so remains unclear. A scientific paper from the Vienna Hörbiger Institute, just to mention this, recently explained that even the most recent publications by Professors Jeans and Jeffreys highlight that the planetary orbits owe their low eccentricity (orbital shape value, i.e., near-circularity) only to the effect of a resisting medium. And according to the statements of the French astronomer A. Veronnet, this is currently the prevailing view. For example, Jeffreys writes literally: "Thus, moons are influenced by a resisting medium much like the planets. But a serious mathematical difficulty has so far made a sufficient investigation of the effects impossible... The motion of a moon that revolves around a planet and is perturbed by the sun is one of the most difficult dynamical problems..." In any case, all these discussions—only briefly mentioned here—show that Hörbiger's demand for a moon-capture is by no means at odds with any established scientific results. And I had to emphasize this urgently, so that the cosmic and Earth-historical background of the whole novel would not appear as fantasy and poetic arbitrariness.

Now I can proceed and present a few points about the processes that must have taken place on the Moon itself during its capture. First, according to the World Ice Theory, the Moon is to be regarded as a body with an earth-like mineral core overlain by a thick crust of water or ice. This assertion also aligns with a whole range of the most recent scientific findings and research, which I cannot discuss in detail here. It is certain that the effects of being captured were considerable for the Moon, especially since the Earth has 81 times its mass and exerted corresponding gravitational forces.

Suppose an Atlantean or ancient American astronomer of that time had observed this with a telescope; it would have been striking how the moon—formerly possessing a Martian character and now being captured—changed dramatically. Previously bright areas became darker, and peculiar misty clouds spread across the body. The Earth's forces had begun their work of destruction on its surface, eventually sculpting the lunar face much as we see it today. Things were quite tumultuous on the Moon at that time: its ice crust burst, streams of water erupted from within, primordial ice floes broke apart and drifted around until, after some time, everything froze solid. Nevertheless, the Earth slowed the Moon's original axial rotation, sucked away the last remnants of its atmosphere, which must have led to intense evaporation of water and sublimation of ice, producing a sort of comet's tail trailing behind the Moon during the capture event. This is understandable when one recalls the effect of the vacuum of space, which would have made the Moon appear almost like an emitter of icy dust. The Earth, so to speak, traveled in a sea of electrically attracted ice dust and was subjected to correspondingly violent downpours, which must have intensified the impression of a world catastrophe among the people of that era—especially since the earth was shaking and raging in all its seams, and the sky was reddened by the blazing fires of volcanoes.

It was only once the moon had somewhat settled into its new orbit as the Earth's satellite, and the Earth itself calmed down again, that the immense catastrophes disappeared, subsided, the sky cleared, and humans could see the new moon standing in the sky night after night. Thus, the reader may now understand why Kiß in his novel also occasionally speaks of the initially comet-like nature of the captured Luna, and why he adheres strictly in this respect as well to the scenarios required by the World Ice Theory. In any case, at the time of the moon's capture, the Earth was sufficiently afflicted by flood, earthquake, and volcanic catastrophes—catastrophes that were not entirely erased from the collective memory of humanity.

As far as the Andean highlands are concerned, an Indian legend, as communicated by Prof. Posnansky in La Paz, relates the following: "The gods, angered by the arrogance of the human race, which dared to undertake such colossal works as the city of Aztlan, decided to destroy mankind and sent their divine messenger Condormamani to Mother Earth. She, Pachamama, shook her womb and poured death and ruin upon the work that was just in the process of being created. Cochamama, the goddess of the great lake, lent her aid and covered the collapsing city with her mantle."

Even though the actual cause of the disaster remains unmentioned here, we do, for example, possess a legend from the Chibchas, a people in the vicinity of the Peruvians, which curiously recalls the reality of the moon-capture catastrophe. Their god Nemauetscheba had an evil wife, Huythaca. Once, when she was especially furious, she caused the Rio Funza (from the sea) to flood back so much that it inundated the entire plateau of Cundinamarca, and only a

few people were able to save themselves on the mountain peaks. Angered by his wife's wickedness, the god grabbed her and hurled her from the earth into the sky, where she transformed into the moon! Strikingly, this account reveals that the Earth now possessed a moon!

Certainly, we are accustomed to labeling such accounts as myth or legend, whose content supposedly provides no guarantee of actual historical events. Yet, as modern research has shown, this position can no longer be maintained. Consider only the relevant works of Edgar Dacqué, who, as a scholar of clear repute, has for years been striving to recognize and extract the reality-values of all those legends that touch upon the primordial world, and to provide the reasons for them. It would go too far here to elaborate further and advocate for the legitimacy of this kind of research.

It is telling, once again, that it is precisely among the Chibchas, a people living near the equator, that we encounter this "legend," while accounts from Mediterranean regions may speak of Proselenes, but do not reveal anything about a remarkable flood associated with the moon's capture. This is immediately understandable, since people living at that latitude at the time would not have experienced the great, flood-like catastrophes that were more equator-proximal. However, the tremendous flood waves that engulfed Atlantis could very well have, in their initial onslaught, licked up to two thousand meters above today's sea level on the Peruvian mountains, only to recede afterward to their current levels. People of the higher and middle latitudes were mainly affected by those forces that, at the time of the moon’s capture, produced severe dislocations of the Earth's rocky crust up to the poles and unleashed unheard-of great earthquakes. Plato even says that, at that time, people by the multitude sank under the earth. The Tiahusinju of the novel, the high plain between the Andes, experienced not only these dislocations, earthquakes, and volcanic catastrophes, but also the flood forces—everything that Kiß principally based the novel upon. The ancient ruins still found there today testify to a once-flourishing high culture, which I will address following the travel reports provided by Kiß himself.

On the southeastern shore of the wide-spreading Lake Titicaca, a shallow, reed-covered bay reaches into the Andean high plateau, ending a few kilometers northwest of Lajas. In the shallow water of this bay, during times when Lake Titicaca is at its lowest, the foundations of ancient cult buildings come to light. Near the dry shoreline, a heavily weathered stone idol also stands. Even more significant, however, are the ruined fields of Tihuanaku—the remains of a former city lying in an elongated valley at about 4,000 meters above sea level, roughly twenty kilometers from today’s Lake Titicaca. Kiß has chosen the name Aztlan instead of Tihuanaku, as it appears in the legends of Mexican peoples.

These ruins—whose exploration the German scholar Professor Posnansky devoted much of his life to—have repeatedly astonished prehistoric researchers, presenting not only the greatest puzzles to solve, but also becoming widely known to laypeople through articles in various magazines. What is especially remarkable is that a great city with significant public buildings once spread across today's harsh and inhospitable highlands, with their thin, breath-stealing air. Palaces, temples, and other buildings have survived in ruins, whose scale is completely out of proportion to the area's current sparse population. That these were monumental structures in a truly modern sense is shown by the dimensions of individual buildings: the Akapana fortress has side lengths of about 200 and 180 meters, the so-called solar observatory Kalasasaya measures 135 by 118 meters, and the stepped mausoleum Puma Punku is about 200 by 200 meters. Aztlan was also a port city, as some of the ancient harbors can still be seen and preserved. Since these now lie on dry land about 27 meters above Lake Titicaca's current level, it justifies the claim that the lake was once larger and reached as far as Aztlan.

Even more remarkable, however, is the fact that the exposed ruins clearly show that various construction works had to be suddenly halted here. A city that was in the midst of being expanded with magnificent buildings was suddenly interrupted in its development. For example, a finely crafted mason's plumb line lies next to a chisel made of hardened bronze at the base of a workpiece that was only just begun and has remained unfinished to this day. Precisely carved niches and ornamented ashlar blocks stand lined up, ready to be set, as do the main cornices at the mausoleum Puma Punku. In the middle of a construction site, trachyte casting molds remain, used for casting the bronze dowels and clamps with which the stones were joined. Near the Kalasasaya observatory, massive cornices lie waiting to be completed. Inside the observatory, a bust was found—covered with dried mud and thus protected from weathering—that resembles the type of a Northerner with finely shaped features and served Kiß as a model for his scholar Godda Apacheta.

All indications suggest that only a more or less unexpected catastrophe could have struck Aztlan, unleashing a horrifying work of destruction. This catastrophe claimed the lives of humans and animals whose bones are scattered en masse throughout the grayish-white clay of the city's subsoil and the surrounding area. The number of these bones is so immense that there must have been hundreds of thousands who met a sudden end here. The proximity of the lake alone suggests that a tidal wave probably swept over Aztlan at night, burying everything beneath it. Evidently, it was not only the city's residents who perished here, but also numerous pilgrims who had come from afar for some great festival. This would again align with Posnansky's research results, who, based on the bones found, identified a wide variety of racial elements.

A compelling argument for a flood catastrophe is also provided by a site on Mount Illimani, which still clearly shows today how an enormous wave

must have broken through here to drain into the lowlands of the Amazon basin. La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, lies right at the breakthrough point, with gigantic mud mountains towering in its vicinity. According to Kiß's account, it is as if the ancient granite cores of the royal Cordillera are set in a cuff of white, gray, and red clay mixed with layers of pebbles. To the observer, it appears that at that time an entire small town (Hanko-Hanko) was swept into the depths on a kilometer-thick chunk of earth breaking off from the upper edge of the La Paz gorge, with the main mass of the flood wave even surging over the town itself. As readers may recall, Kiß wove this quite dramatic event into his novel. That this flood catastrophe was accompanied by seismic and volcanic horrors is still evidenced today by the layers of ash in the Andean highlands, probably originating from the numerous volcanoes of the Cordillera.

The flood wave that leapt over Hanko-Hanko, thus carrying out an event of the most unique kind, must have been of unprecedented force, as testified by the masses of clay and debris on both sides of Illimani, a solid granite buttress. Nevertheless, the surging waters found their way into what is now Argentina, and probably also flowed westwards toward the present-day nitrate fields in Chile, draining into the Pacific Ocean. This devastating flood event was triggered by the earthquake activity on Earth caused by the capture of the moon, which burst the dams of the high-altitude lakes. These were heavily drained, so that today's still considerable bodies of water on the Bolivian high plateau—Titicaca, Coipasa, Poopó, and the Uyuni salt flats—are merely the remnants since the turbulent days of the moon's capture.

Apart from all the geological evidence, which undoubtedly points to the terrible event at Tihuanaku, another very significant circumstance should be recalled.

It is well known that in their religious or magical symbols, humans represent objects or living beings that they somehow see as linked to their fate, and that they wish, through corresponding imitations, to somehow gain power over them. In the extensive collection in La Paz, which contains the prehistoric finds of the Andean highlands, we find predominantly many representations of the moon. For example, among a hundred fired clay vessels from the Tihuanaku layers, there are hardly ten that depict the sun, but many that show the black puma with the moon. The association of the moon with the puma, the embodiment of evil, clearly indicates that the people of Tihuanaku attached particular importance to the moon, and that they harbored some secret fear—partly preserved from ancient tradition—of its effects.

But most importantly—and this is crucial—they only ever depicted the moon as a planet, for they always reproduced it as a round disk, the typical planetary disk. Among all the ceramic finds, there is not a single one depicting the moon as a crescent; at least, despite diligent searching, Kiß was unable to find any representation of the moon in crescent form. This can only mean that

these ancient Tihuanaku people were completely unfamiliar with the moon phases we know, that they lived as "pre-lunarians," at the end of the last moonless era, during which—as described—they could ominously observe in the sky the planet that was about to become the moon.

When the creator of the World Ice Theory (Welteislehre) arrives at the conclusion, based on his deductions, that the Earth catastrophes associated with the capture of the moon must have occurred at least ten thousand years before the beginning of our calendar, this result strikingly coincides with the values calculated by Professor Posnansky for the destruction of Tihuanaku. In works published, for now, only in Spanish, this scholar has explained the method he used for dating, aided by the astronomically oriented construction of the Kalasasaya building. The destruction, he suggests, occurred around 11,600 BC, and happened as suddenly as the abrupt halt of the construction projects, as described above, would imply.

This date was again jointly reviewed, corrected, and even somewhat extended by Kiß and Posnansky two and a half years ago. More than fourteen thousand years are said to have elapsed since relentless forces of nature struck the people of the Andean highlands, since Tihuanaku (Aztlan) as the main seat of an Atlantean colony met its destined hour, and since Atlantis itself ultimately fell victim to the floods of the Atlantic Ocean. This again aligns closely with Plato’s chronology for the fall of Atlantis and reveals yet another parallel to a research finding by Professor Herman Wirth. In his comprehensive studies on the prehistory of humanity (comparative investigations of the zodiacal signs), this scholar has shown that Atlantis, as a radiating center of early high cultures, met its end ten to eleven thousand years before our era.

Given that all these independently determined datings provide compelling evidence that the temporal distance must lie, on average, around 12,000 BC, they collectively place the blame squarely on Luna. For among all attempts to interpret the true causes behind these catastrophic events, the explanation provided by the World Ice Theory (Welteislehre) dominates by far. Only it allows us to understand the hitherto mysteriously veiled true prehistory of humanity—adorned with brilliant cultures—and provides researchers, who are here treading new ground, with a foundation derived from natural phenomena. “What until now—if we cite Prof. Dacqué—was compressed into a geological time span, only now, through the World Ice Theory and its extension into prehistory, takes on a truly world-historical visage.” Perhaps I may be permitted, especially in this context, to call particular attention to my work “Schöpfung des Menschen” (Koehler & Amelang Verlag, Leipzig), which also outlines all the new perspectives presented here and focuses them, as it were, through the lens of the World Ice Theory.

Unfortunately, I am unable here to present this “truly world-historical visage” in its full magnitude, especially with regard to the Andean highlands.

For when the Aztlan of the novel was destroyed, it was only the most recent act in a sequence of world-historical and geological tragedies reaching much further back in time. Indeed, earth and prehistorical research in the Andes has shown that cultures arose and vanished here, flourished for tens of thousands of years, and were then destroyed again. And where it was no longer possible to solve the accumulating mysteries, to interpret the signs of truly immense forces of nature, only the World Ice Theory allows us to continue to trace the single clear thread into the grayness of the past, showing how cosmic events, time and again, determined what mankind—emerging since primordial times—was destined to suffer.

If I may allow myself to say a few words on this, it is necessarily because Kiß, in his novel, hints at a perspective reaching far into the deep past of Tihuanaku—namely, that well before the Tihuanaku of the last moonless era, there must already have been such a time of an actual “moon age,” during which a predecessor of our present moon exerted its forces, just as we might expect from our current moon in the future. For this predecessor of the present moon eventually crashed down to Earth, and this catastrophe was experienced and partially survived by humans.

The ancient agricultural terraces (the "Andenes" of the Bolivians)—which, by the way, are found similarly in Abyssinia—rising up to five thousand meters above sea level, are evidence that the original inhabitants of the Andean highlands were driven up into the mountains, and that the lake region, with its rising waters (as revealed by ancient shoreline traces), also played its part. In those times, the sea must again have been directly connected with these mountain waters, for which a wealth of corresponding factors (including the animal life of today's lakes) serves as proof, so that the current lake region of the Andean highlands can only be described as residual remains of the sea. In terms of the World Ice Theory, this was the period when the predecessor of the present moon drove the waters of the Earth as a raging girdle-flood around the equator, and only the highest regions of the equatorial zone were spared from the encroaching sea. Particular fields of ruins (such as lime deposits on the blocks of certain structures) in Tihuanaku indicate that Tihuanaku too was inundated at that time.

There are also remains in the Andes of curious underground rock dwellings, built and designed as if people were trying to protect themselves from a looming catastrophe. And that catastrophe did come, and was fulfilled, when the predecessor of the current moon crashed to Earth, pelting it—especially the equatorial regions—with a hail of ice and stone debris. The people of that time naturally had no mind for monumental buildings, but focused simply on survival. And with the fall of the moon, the waters previously amassed toward the equator were freed from their constraints, to pour toward the poles as an all-encompassing, actual deluge. Even today, the effects of this sudden drainage can be seen with stunning clarity when crossing the three gigantic terraces of the

coastal Cordillera. It is as if a giant hand had plowed the earth here and swept across it with endless masses of debris. Everywhere, the same evidence of ancient, massive water events can be found, and Posnansky himself admits that supposed glacial activity (the usual fallback explanation) cannot account for it. The overwhelming impression that all these things must have made on Kiß is clear from the words of one of his travel reports. There may be enough interesting things on Earth known to geologists that do not surprise them, but in the Cordilleras, one truly learns to pray!

After the drainage of this deluge and some subsequent after-effects, the last moonless period began; humanity once again had enough space to spread far and wide, and Tihuanaku entered a new and splendid era—though we do not know if, from the very beginning, Atlantean colonists had settled there. In any case, it is certain that Tihuanaku experienced several periods of splendor and decline, as Professor Posnansky, the best expert on the prehistoric Andean sites, asserts and has definitively demonstrated. And thus, we return to the setting of the novel, seeing the ancient Andean metropolis suffer its fate with the capture of the moon, as the tragic end of a flowering era lasting thousands of years. No human hands ever came together to rebuild it; world history took other paths, and today its scholars are striving to reconstruct the former glory.

Now it should also be clear to the reader why, quite early in the novel, Kiß has his pre-moon astronomers "remember" a past that lies many ages beyond even themselves, "when there was a second celestial body besides the Sun." This refers to the predecessor of our present Moon, which the highly advanced people of Tihuanaku most likely witnessed—something that the sculptural works at the Sun Gate of Kalasasaya seem to confirm.

In the story, the young Atlantean duke marvels at these sculptural works, which have survived to this day and, as research has confirmed, undeniably reveal a calendar system—a system that, much like ours, can be derived from lunar orbits around the Earth. Although interpretations of this ancient calendar system still vary (and a detailed discussion of them cannot be given here), it is certain that only a Moon could be the subject of such sculptural creation. The beautifully carved frieze of Tihuanaku, adorned with so many figures and symbols, clearly shows a calendrical division into months, days, and hours. People of the last moonless era naturally had no Moon for such a calendar system, so we must look to far older generations—those who, thus, created their astronomically oriented sculptures before the last moonless time, many thousands of years ago.

Although it pains me to forgo a closer look at the marvel that is the Sun Gate of Tihuanaku[6], I can at least offer a few clarifying words. While our year (one Earth orbit around the Sun) already corresponded fairly closely to the

[6] Edmund Kiß has a major work on this subject, as part of a corresponding travel and research report on Tihuanaku.

present in the earliest times—and a subsequent shortening of this period due to the Earth's orbital shrinkage around the Sun can be practically disregarded—the lengths of months and days during a “moon age” were very different. For, the closer a Moon came to Earth, the faster its orbit became, so that in the end a month (a lunar orbit) lasted only a few hours. Meanwhile, Earth's rotation was at first increasingly braked by the approaching Moon, then, as the Moon’s downfall neared, it was sped up again, so that the number of hours in an Earth day as a unit of measure increased or decreased accordingly. But since, as mentioned, the length of an Earth year can be considered temporally unchanged, naturally, with days lengthened by hours, fewer than 365 Earth days would fall within the year.

This compelling logical conclusion of the World Ice Theory—which one can only fully grasp through study of its literature—now appears to be confirmed by the Tihuanaku frieze: among the other pictorial representations that can be interpreted as days, there are 288, or 290 if two fish depictions are included. Thus, these ancient artists of Tihuanaku, working under astronomical guidance, recorded a stage of the penultimate moon age, when an Earth day necessarily lasted around thirty of our current hours—a stage that, from a cosmic perspective, must have held for millennia. In this way, the veil is lifted from the curious reference Kiß makes in the novel to the 288 or 290 Earth days, which his Tihuanaku scholars at first cannot explain to the Atlantean duke.

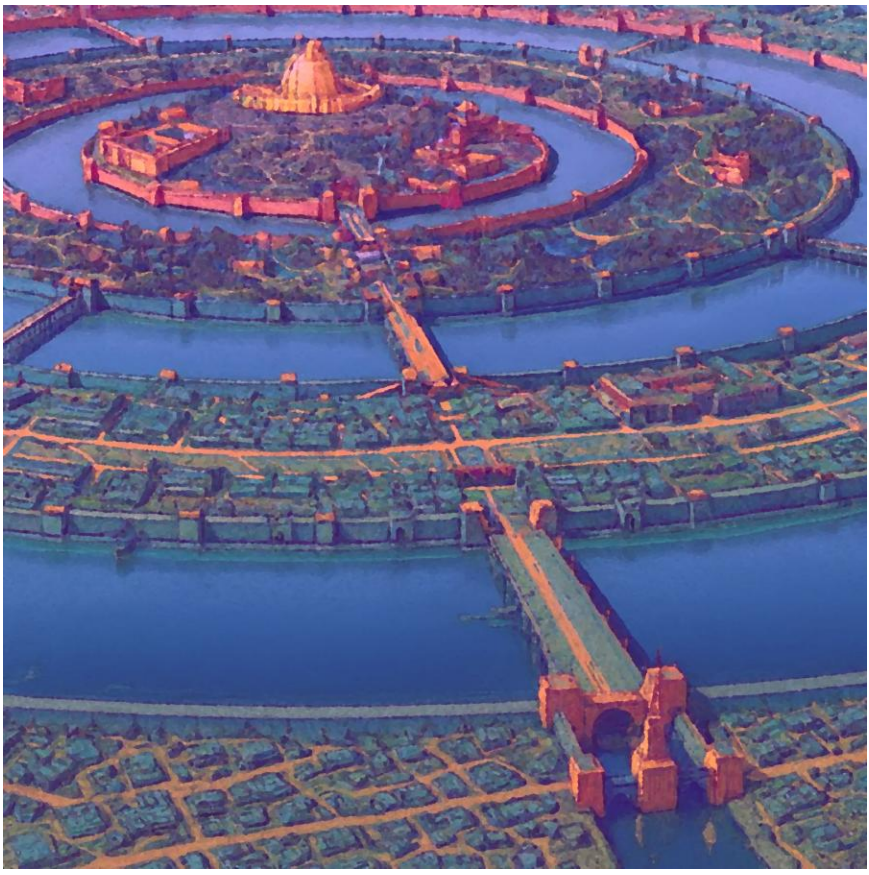
Strange and truly unique worlds of research and reality are hidden within this novel. Unlocking them with the key of the World Ice Theory will always fill even the layperson with wonder.

July 1931.

Spring in Atlantis

A novel from the flowering age
of the Empire of Atlantis

by Edmund Kiß



Around the fortress of Atlantis ran rings of canals and earth belts, upon which the various districts of the city were laid. The widest of the ring-shaped canals was eighteen hundred feet wide, and the next earth belt had the same width. The innermost canal, however, which surrounded the island with the towering royal fortress, was six hundred feet wide, and the island itself measured three thousand feet in diameter. (According to Plato's account.)

When a researcher and poet of Edmund Kiß's rank brings the past to life, all the sources of the German soul begin to murmur; tens of thousands of years are spanned, and a bridge is built to everything that was once of our blood and our kind in the remotest antiquity.

Relying on the detailed account of the Greek sage Plato and the latest findings of prehistoric research, Kifi creates an extraordinarily gripping image of the life and bustle in Atlantis, which sank approximately 14,000 years ago.

Race and faith — thus the core questions of every völkisch community — form, in this novel set roughly 20,000 years ago, the foundation upon which unfolds the dramatic struggle of the northern Ario-heroic man, Baldur Wieborg and his loyal followers against the alien influences of power-hungry priests.

Triumphant throughout this book shines the heroism of a life and happiness sacrificed in loyalty to one's people. And we hear the old song that will never fall silent, that resounds again whenever a great and good man falls to murderous steel — the legend of Baldur, whom Loki slew.

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Edmund Kiß

Warga

Warga, the youthful daughter of Weeling Ase Gadirus, professor of constitutional law at the Atlantis Academy of Administration, experienced for the first time that one could, as the headmistress of a horticultural school (o2), be thoroughly dissatisfied.

When the young woman, at the summer solstice, was entrusted with the school by the district agricultural administration on account of her passing the examination, everything at first went well and smoothly: the gardeners were well trained, the vegetable beds tidy, the banana plantations tended and pruned, the rows of tomatoes tied up on flexible bronze wires so that they looked like corridors of glowing torches, and the working hours of the apprentices and journeymen amounted to only five hours. The girl trainees in the flower and vegetable gardens even finished the day's tasks in little more than four hours and, after another two hours of scientific instruction, could go to the beach to bathe or play ball in one of the public arenas.

That had changed by the winter solstice. New male and female students had moved into the school, their faces radiant with youthful happiness and enthusiasm for work, taking up residence in the airy huts among the palm plantations by the eighth transverse canal of the second ring city, and looked in incredulous amazement at the first pocket money the district administration had distributed to the beginners in earnest life's work.

If the performance to be expected corresponded even remotely to the noise that arose under the swaying palm fronds early in the morning, then this was bound to be an outstanding agricultural year, given the number of Atlantean young men who had chosen the gardener's profession.

Fortunately, as was necessary to maintain operations, half of the old, experienced core workforce remained; otherwise, things would have gone badly for Warga Gadirus and the good reputation of her school.

It was a bit less noisy among the new young girls, whose fresh, snow-white work smocks fluttered cheerfully through the airy pillared halls of their stone dormitories by the southeast branch canal, called "The Linden" (1 at o2). This is not to say that the young girls from Atlantis, Paardegatt, Brammerloh, Antianyu, and the other islands of the empire needed fewer words per unit of time than the boys to express their feelings; it was probably in the federal state of Atlantis as it is today. They actually needed more, only the strength of their voices not only balanced things in favor of the young men, but decisively tipped the scales. In addition, the wind turbines and water pumps on the linden canal rattled so loudly that from a certain distance one really couldn't tell where it

rattled more: from the slanted sail surfaces of the irrigation pumps or from the red mouths of the Atlantean young girls.

Warga Gadirus would not have been so worried if everything had proceeded as usual. That the childish heads of the boys and girls had to laugh and chatter was natural, and the young daughter of Ase Weeling Gadirus was the last person not to join in the laughter and chatting.

But today was not meant to proceed as usual, for her father had sent her a letter from the imperial government of Asgard announcing the visit of Kazike (chief) Paczi Manca from Cuzco, the Inca empire on the cloud-high Andean plateau of the western continent. Paczi Manca was the agricultural advisor to the Ingas (rulers) of Cuzco, Quito, and Ollantaytambo. In a fit of patriarchal prudence, this brown-skinned prince had thought it wise to ask the imperial government in Atlantis to introduce his councilors to the secrets of Asic (Aryan) administration and economy. Such requests from foreign states, even those at a lower level of intellectual development, were generally granted, since such contacts often led to trade relations, which were welcome to the decemvirate of the Atlantean islands due to the necessity of exporting surplus goods from the empire. Moreover, such economic relations often resulted, over the course of Atlantean history, in political ties. The economic conquest of a foreign country was often followed by the advance of the imperial army, to secure trade and ultimately to annex the respective state as a new border province to the empire.

Such approval, by the way, was not unanimous in the ten kingdoms—especially not when it concerned large and warlike peoples. A number of prominent university professors, particularly those of public law and state administration, and even some economics instructors and officials of the imperial and state governments, warned against being too generous in accommodating such requests. However, the economic interests of the empire were too important to the royal governors of the Atlantean member states to be sacrificed to concerns about the future. Location, military strength, and the fleet guaranteed the security of the empire for the foreseeable future, and any growing enemies on the border marches would be met with increased power from the governors. Moreover, the priestly temple administration—the High Solar Gate—exerted decisive influence in cases of doubt. Its concerns were not only economic, though in this respect they were considerable, perhaps as significant as those of the civil administration; more important to the higher clergy, however, was the opportunity to use newly established trade relations for spiritual and psychological influence over their counterparts.

Warga Gadirus glanced at the sundial, which towered over the entire square of the horticultural school atop a high basalt pillar. Since the announced arrival time of the visitors was near, and the government was known for its unpleasant punctuality, the gardener sent an older foreman to the palm grove

and a young girl to the stone houses by the linden canal to ask for quiet, as guests from the Tiahusinyu Highlands would soon be arriving to tour the school.

For a moment, Warga considered making herself look nice, at least putting on new sandals; but then she shook her slender head with pride and told herself she was already attractive enough for any visitor—certainly for the slit-eyed, brown-skinned people from Cuzco. At the door of the garden house, where her office and the classrooms were located, stood old Burd, the cleaning woman and building manager, waving somewhat excitedly. Warga nodded, smoothed her blond hair under the silken net, and walked slowly toward the house. She could see how, from the second ring canal of the inner city, a white rowboat with a gilded prow, after a short, warning chime of the ship's bell, turned into the cross-canal of the "Linden"—at the stern the flag of the empire, blue with the silver symbol of the sun, and above the midship a white sun sail with golden fringes. It was one of the row galleys of the Asic (Aryan) central government, headquartered in the fortress of Asgard at the heart of Atlantis. A slender customs cutter, moored on the far side of the "Linden" by the group of buildings housing the city tax administration, dipped and raised its ensign in greeting, and the galley captain from Asgard raised his hand in thanks.

"The landing steps are clear," said old Burd importantly. "I had your galley and the students' boats pulled up to our loading bridge so the gentlemen from the government can disembark comfortably."

The "gentlemen from the government" rarely visited the horticultural school, which was under the authority of the agricultural district administration, the executive body of a corporate guild. The good cleaning woman's excitement was therefore understandable, and even Warga had to admit to herself, with some annoyance, that she felt uneasy at the thought of coming under the scrutinizing eyes of the high officials from Asgard.

The famous fortress in the center of the city radiated a kind, yet penetrating force of will, which, precisely because it rarely manifested openly, was all the more effective when it did. Until now, Warga had had nothing to do directly with the government in her young life. True, she held an official appointment as a gardener, countersigned by the deputy warden of the council group for land management and nutrition, and she knew the gentleman as a guest at her father's social evenings; but in an official capacity, she had never dealt with him or any other councilor from Asgard. Today, for the first time, Warga Gadirus felt that she was no longer a child, but had been placed in a position of responsibility—albeit not a very significant one—as a member of the völkisch community of a great, world-spanning empire, and that she would be called to account for her actions whenever and wherever it pleased that invisible power known as "the government."

Warga stood on the steps of gray, white-speckled granite as the government galley approached at arrow speed. The young woman's sharp eyes recognized her father beneath the awning. He sat among several brown-skinned gentlemen who, despite the summer heat, wore red woven mantles shot through with golden threads, from which protruded angular, flat skulls with grinning mouths.

Warga was annoyed by this. Why did these foreigners always have to grin? In the streets of Atlantis, you could sometimes see them and their kind, gazing at the splendors of the famous völkisch metropolis—small, stocky, bedecked with jewels, short, sturdy legs, and always grinning, as if they were constantly embarrassed.

But her father!

Now it became obvious why the lower peoples of the Atlantean islands, and even more so those of the distant borderlands, regarded the Asen as white gods—or at least as favored men with divine attributes and origins, who in all circumstances must be vastly superior. The sun could just catch the hand of the tall man, which looked as white and delicate as that of a beautiful woman, and yet in its form, strong-willed and spiritualized, there was nothing feminine, despite the sparkling emeralds that sat on his slender fingers like the eyes of a predatory beast—gifts from the imperial king Warager Ase Torgaard to the scholar.

As the boat headed for the steps, Warga also noticed that, in addition to the four Inca men from Cuzco, the director of the Royal Imperial Office for Land Management and Nutrition was sitting beneath the sunshade, and beside him was a member of the security guard from Asgard, whose bronze helmet shone distinctly out from the shadow. She knew the king's immediate advisor, Herr Wigrid Ase Torsta, only by name; she had also seen him occasionally at festivals of the district agricultural administration, and the presence of this gentleman alone gave her a bit of a flutter in her heart. On the other hand, she knew the young warrior all the better. That was her cousin, Baldur Ase Wieborg, the only son of Ase Evin Wieborg from Thule, which lay north of the Englalandic March and was regarded as the ancestral homeland of the Atlantean Asen.

Despite his youth and as a simple farmer's son, Baldur Wieborg had, to everyone's surprise, passed his exams at the Asgard military academy with distinction, and at present—until his posting to some border province of the Empire—was commanding the third company on the Troia, as the fortress of Asgard was also called.

Among soldiers and sword-bearers, he was called, with a certain affection, simply by his first name, Baldur, because a radiant youthfulness emanated from him, to which even the most hardened characters had to yield, whether they wanted to or not.

Among the young women of the capital, Herr Wieborg was well known, even if rarely seen. While other young men bathed together with the girls on the beaches or in the canals, or tested their strength in the sports arenas, Baldur Wieborg preferred to seek physical recreation and strengthening together with his fellow warriors, and was seldom seen in the public baths. He would occasionally appear at the social events of the guild societies and was always welcome, for his manner was modest and self-assured, like that of a seasoned traveler.

His tall eagle-helmet was also often seen at dramatic performances and at the chariot racecourses of the capital, and his accomplishments as a racing rider on the royal arena at Idafeld were widely known.

Nonetheless, little was really known about the young captain. There were capable captains in Atlantis as numerous as the sands of the sea, and these blond men with their gray, far-seeing eyes were almost all tall and well-built, and the rare distinction from the military academy for scholarly achievements could not be seen on Herr Baldur Wieborg when he entered or left the council chambers for war in Asgard, clad in his plain military coat.

Warga Gadirus puzzled over why her cousin had been chosen to guide the guests from Cuzco through her horticultural school, but the mystery was soon resolved. Herr Wieborg was not present in his capacity as military captain, but as the official interpreter, since the Incas spoke only their native language. Warga's father, Professor Weeling Gadirus, spoke the Arawak language of the Cuzco people only very poorly, and there were few men in Atlantis who had mastered the language of the frontier people in the towering mountains of the Andes. Thus, they had apparently settled on Captain Wieborg, who was known to have learned the language of the borderland people in anticipation of his transfer to the Tiahusinyu Highlands.

Warga had the dubious pleasure of having her white hand kissed by the slit-eyed councilors of the Inga, and she was glad that Baldur Wieborg did not follow their example this time, though he usually did so quite willingly; for the young gardener's hand was not so delicate that a man's lips would stop halfway in horror. After the group of learners and their escorts had entered the school building, Warga quickly dipped her hands in a bowl filled with water, and Herr Wieborg, who understood, handed her a towel with a smile.

"You can make up for what you missed," he said quietly. And Warga knew what the captain meant.

"Maybe next time," nodded the young woman, and Baldur Wieborg beamed with amusement at his slender cousin and friend's ability to read thoughts. Warga, however, couldn't help but think how fitting the name Baldur was for this person.

The director of the imperial agricultural office, Wigrid Ase Torsta, beckoned the captain over. The answering of questions began. Warga's responses as school director were translated quickly and seemingly effortlessly by Herr Wieborg, but the professor of public law, Weeling Gadirus, occasionally looked up in surprise, for it seemed to him that the information given to the Cuzcos in their native language was not always entirely accurate.

While the captain, surrounded by the small figures of the foreign guests, wandered through Warga Gadirus's demonstration garden, the professor found himself unable to pay attention to the meaning of the foreign language, since Herr Wigrid Torsta occupied him with some news from Asgard. Rather left to herself, Warga strolled between the two groups of men along the well-kept paths and was glad that Baldur Wieborg did not burden her with too many questions. Instead, the young captain had taken over the tour and gargled the Cuzco language with such mastery that the gardener couldn't hide an amused smile. She wasn't surprised, either, that the guests' slit-eyes occasionally turned back to her, and that their gazes, with growing respect, lingered on her sun-tanned face. Her cousin seemed to be telling the brown-skinned men all sorts of marvels about her.

Herr Wieborg slowly turned to her.

"Frau Warga, I have to answer a question from these fellows that's a bit tricky," he said with a secret laugh. "The Kazike Paczi Manca wants to know whether you are a real goddess or merely of divine origin. What should I say?"

The kindly, open look of the tall warrior showed that the question was asked without any malice. Wieborg came from the white northern land the Atlanteans called Thule, and his kinship with Gadirus was only distant. He naturally assumed that Warga was a pure-blooded Asin, a child of the sun, just like himself.

But the young gardener felt a powerless bitterness welling up in her at this question, even though it had been asked in a joking tone. Her mother came from a mixed race refined by Asic (Aryan) blood, with natives of the southern imperial island Murnaat, and the look she now gave the captain from her blue, angry eyes was anything but friendly.

"I have been recognized by the Race Office in Asgard as a pure-blooded Asin," she burst out passionately, but immediately regretted her vehemence when she saw how embarrassed the young swordsman became, and how helplessly his clear, gray star-like eyes, beneath his high, helmet-shrouded brow, rested on hers.

"I'm sorry," Wieborg assured her. "But I hoped to amuse you with my question, not to hurt you. Still, the question was foolish and insensitive; I'll answer it myself."

And the Kazike Paczi Manca received the succinct reply that the head of the horticultural school was, as the guests had rightly assumed, of divine descent, as were all pure-blooded Asen. From the beautiful dark blue eyes of the gardener, two tears of anger rolled down onto her round, brown cheeks, were caught there by her work-worn hand, and then calm returned to the rebellious depths of her woman's soul.

Weeling Ase Gadirus, who had overheard the brief exchange between the Asgard captain and his blossoming child, had to muster all his attention to follow the talk of the high government official Wigrid Torsta, who cleverly discussed the latest changes in appointments among the higher clergy, especially in the central and southern states of the Atlantean islands; and about the new religious welfare schools for subracial natives; and the pastoral care for galley rowers and dock workers. The chief agricultural leader of the Empire related all these things with restrained mockery, and Weeling Ase Gadirus was not surprised by this. It was well known that Herr Torsta, himself—like Baldur Wieborg—a government official who had come from the Nordic peasantry, was a bitter opponent of all special rights regarding land and taxes, of which the High Solar Gate, the temple administration in Atlantis, had increasingly availed itself over the past centuries. And all these new institutions were of such a privileged nature that civil laws usually stopped short before them.

The professor of public law overcame the awkward impression that young Wieborg's question had also made on him, and voiced the suspicion that the translation of the answers to the guests' questions did not always seem entirely reliable to him.

"This approach by Captain Wieborg has my approval," replied Herr Torsta calmly. "The King would expect nothing else. What information is beneficial to the state and empire, and what is not, must be left to us, the responsible counselors. I consider myself fortunate to have found, in your young relative Baldur Wieborg, a clever and understanding mind who knows how to satisfy our guests from Cuzco without unnecessarily revealing important interests of the Empire. Unfortunately, I was unable to prevent the fact that, for the tour of the imperial solar observatories and the priestly schools in the temple districts, the guides are to be linguistically skilled clergy, who have expressly declined Captain Wieborg's participation."

The professor of public law slowed his pace, to prevent the conversation from being overheard by his daughter. Over the course of the discussion, however, he forgot this intention, so that Warga Gadirus had the

opportunity to learn many useful things that would not be insignificant for her future.

"Is young Wieborg considered so significant by the High Solar Gate that his presence during the tour of the temples and observatories was explicitly declared undesirable?" asked the professor in surprise.

"It appears so," smiled Herr Wigrid Torsta. "Priestly gentlemen can sense a free mind and an even freer soul anywhere on earth, even if that soul resides in the body of an insignificant swordsman from Asgard. If a warrior busies himself with astronomy, that alone is suspicious..."

"Please, Herr Torsta!" interrupted Weeling Ase Gadirus. "Wieborg is a knight of the Northlands and has been a seafarer from his youth, like almost all northerners. Our best minds at the Empire's solar observatories sit on broad Viking shoulders."

"The best, yes, I grant you that," responded the high official. "But whether they occupy the most important observatories? On that point, I think there is room for debate."

"True, but the appointments to the observatories are not made directly by the King, but on the recommendation of the High Solar Gate," said the professor, with a hint of bitterness. "Here too, the Empire has relinquished important rights in the past. It is easier to give up fortresses than to win them. As an independent professor, I can only say that the civil administration has—failed in this matter."

Wigrid Ase Torsta smiled a little maliciously and remarked that this failure had not been without its advantages for the son of the law professor, the chamberlain of the Gate, Odil Gadirus.

"That's true as well," the other confirmed, ignoring the sarcasm. "For me and my son, there's even a slight grievance in this—'preferment' by the Venerable in Urd, if you want to call it that. The High Solar Gate is not averse to breaking the unwritten laws of the Asen, that at least the high and highest offices of state should be filled by pure-blooded Northerners. Isn't the recognition of my children as full Asen already a clear loosening of the law? Shouldn't this also be seen as another failure of the civil administration, or is it perhaps that the times are pushing for new forms, because the old ones have outlived their usefulness? That too is a question worth considering."

Herr Torsta fell silent. In such matters, he thought as a son of Nordic farmers, and with little regard for sentiment. After all, he did not allow the famous horses on the Atlantean islands of Paardegatt and Gaatland to be ruined by indiscriminate breeding, and so, for him, the raising of pure-blooded Nordic

people was a matter of course—one that ought not be violated without consequence. What was enforced for horses, the thinking Nordic person was to observe doubly and triply—and of their own free will.

Unfortunately, the supreme Race Office of the Empire did not always think so logically. This was due to difficulties that inevitably arose with a total population of over forty million people on the Atlantean islands alone, among whom the proportion of the pure-blooded ruling class could barely be estimated at two million. And within that number, a significant percentage were so-called "recognized" (Anerkannte)—that is, in truth, no longer completely pure-blooded Asen.

The High Solar Gate, out of an understandable desire to increase its spiritual influence over the disenfranchised masses, opposed the broader efforts for further "recognition," and was aided in this aim by the lack of a written racial law. It anticipated the eventual melting away of the block of pure-blooded Asen, and drew both the unrecognized and the recognized into its sphere through preferential treatment in many areas. The growth of internal division, the continued widening of the gulf between the people and the Asic ruling stratum, was one of the prerequisites for its priestly exercise of power. For this reason, the so-called "recognized," upon whom the silent stigma of lacking full validity clung despite official recognition, enjoyed particular promotion by the High Solar Gate. And in this sense, it is understandable that the professor of law, Gadirus, could speak of an injury when his son, chamberlain Odil Gadirus, was favored.

The Inca people, together with their leader, had stopped in the midst of the neatly kept beds of medicinal herbs and poisonous plants, for the Inca of Cuzco had just drawn his counselors' attention to these marvelous herbs that the realm of the sun-children was said to cultivate in secret, hidden gardens. He was probably thinking of using his newly acquired knowledge in this area for the effective handling of troublesome relatives, for the envoys from Cuzco had curiously inquired several times about the famous poison gardens. And now the slit-eyed gentlemen were standing directly before the marvel, which suddenly seemed no longer so marvelous to them, for here everything was shown and explained with such naturalness, as if there were nothing in Atlantis that needed to be concealed from perfect strangers.

Once again, Paczi Manca grinned at the tall, beautiful Warga Gadirus, who—as he now knew—was a child of the gods, and yet did not hesitate to answer the questions of him, the brown, ape-like Cuzco. He had the tea plant and coffee bush shown to him, was allowed to pluck a few leaves from the coca plant, gazed reverently at the red poppy fields, in which young girls scraped the white sap from the notched pods with wooden knives—sap that would be processed into a variety of healing medicines. He had the purpose of the intoxicating hemp explained to him, for he had never heard of its pain-relieving

effect, and sniffed curiously at the leaves and blossoms of the newly planted young camphor trees, which, alternating with various tea bushes, grew under shady mats in orderly rows.

At the loading dock on the linden canal, a large trading ship had arrived. Porters brought crates of fresh and dried vegetables on board, and the cheerful noise of the new class of gardeners echoed across the slow-flowing surface of the "Linden."

The foreigners also learned why the canal was called the "Linden" (Canal). It was fed by hot springs that arose at the foot of the mountainous and volcanic hinterland and, branching off from the linden canal, served in countless secondary channels to irrigate the gardens of the metropolis of millions. Even across the canal bridges, special pipelines led into the residential districts of the world city, supplying individual households and their small and large gardens with warm water. It was self-evident that the vast fields, meadows, and market gardens on the Idafeld were the first to take advantage of this blessing from the volcanic homeland. Soil heating with warm water—this was the secret behind the overwhelming fertility of Atlantis's world-famous gardens, which produced several harvests each solar year, and in an abundance utterly unknown on the cold heights of the Inca lands. That, with such exuberant growth, every weed had to be relentlessly eradicated was, of course, obvious to the Asen; but that this required serious, constant labor with several shifts each day was not entirely clear to the "slit-eyes." They simply accepted the conviction that white gods were at work here, and so everything must succeed for them. They understood nothing about the strict regulation of short working hours for individuals, the compulsory learning and labor for the entire Asic population, or the expediency of modest yet sufficient pay for work. They were most surprised that the money consisted only of round brass tokens of varying sizes and denominations, when it was world-famous that in Asgard the walls of the great pillar hall were covered in gold, and the columns and sculptures were even made entirely of gold. They had little idea of the legal regulation of land management. Nor would they have understood if it had been explained to them that the sixty thousand agricultural estates on the Idafeld were assigned only as fiefs, and that they could be withdrawn from the leaseholder, for example, if he allowed weeds to get out of control.

Baldur Wieborg observed with a slight smile the deep impression made on the foreigners by the distant, towering fortress of Asgard. The Troia of Atlantis blazed in the glow of the morning sun like a gigantic red-hot torch, undergirded by a silvery, sparkling circular rampart. The foreign gentlemen could not be convinced otherwise: Asgard was built of pure gold and silver, or at any rate, that is what they liked to tell at home, even though the information they received in Atlantis was usually accurate.

The immense triple ring walls were actually clad in less precious metals—steel-hard brass and a tin-silver alloy, whose use for weapons and household utensils could be observed everywhere on the streets.

Paczi Manca murmured in deep reverence, “Gold. Gold!” and Baldur Wieborg turned away with an amused smile. The incomprehensible magic of gold bewitched such “half-apes” as the Inca envoys without resistance. Whether it was gold or brass seemed to make no difference. The foreign guests in Atlantis considered everything that glittered to be gold.

The young captain possessed neither wealth nor significant jewelry. His house, which stood on the first platform of Asgard, he had received as a royal fief from the imperial government—small and modest, like the dwellings of even the highest dignitaries; and the land it stood on was a state fief, unsellable and therefore, for its holder, essentially without value. In Atlantis, not even a simple sandal strap could be bought with gold; for that, one first had to earn the necessary brass coins. The realm belonged to the Asen, and even the king lived on Asgard as a tenant of Allvater’s fief.

“What are these people actually aiming at with their visit?” Warga Gadirus asked her cousin Wieborg, as the tour came to an end and the guests, as a reward for their studiousness, were consuming great bowls of sweet strawberries in the schoolhouse, covered with white cream.

“They want to introduce our imperial constitution in their Inca empire,” laughed Baldur Wieborg, his eyes shining, having already forgiven Warga’s angry glances. “But they don’t want the structure of the federal state. Presumably it will all turn into a terrible muddle. Of the true nature of our system, those poor fellows barely have a clue. I’ve had the Kazike Manca explain it to me: the Inga is supposed to become God and sole ruler, representative of the Sun—Sun in person—and all the others, serfs. They’re supposed to get food, work, be cared for in old age, get house and land as a fief. In short, a dreadful mixture of misunderstood Asic principles. Only, the people aren’t supposed to learn anything, because the Inga wants to be the highest priest as well. If that’s the case, he’s right to want to keep his serfs in the darkness of ignorance.”

“So in Cuzco they want to introduce in perfected form exactly what development in our Empire is heading towards,” replied Warga Gadirus. Baldur Wieborg did not let his cousin’s eyes go. His tanned, narrow face became inscrutable, his bright gray eyes probed the depths of the dark blue stars beneath her white, pure brow, as if he wanted to read in them where a young gardener had acquired such insight. Did this young woman know the dangers of the developments taking place in the Empire, in the states and border provinces, unless someone came who could seize the helm with a strong hand? Did she, in

the deepest sense of the word, know that not everything that glittered in Atlantis was gold?

In the heart of the beautiful gardener, a secret fear flickered, which she could not explain to herself. The gray lights of her cousin's eyes suddenly tormented her. She felt, in that moment, as if the captain was demanding her very body and soul; as if the fine threads winding around her soul were as inescapable as fate itself.

"Are you my ally, Warga?" the captain asked seriously.

"I don't understand you," lied the gardener restlessly.

"You have understood me," Herr Wieborg contradicted. "I am in bitter need of allies. Allies with a bright, free spirit, who have deeply felt and understood what's at stake. And what's at stake is a lot—everything."

"You seek your allies among the blood enemy," said Warga bitterly.

"Could I really be such a fool?" asked Baldur Wieborg, and his radiant, triumphant smile softened his powerful, kingly features. "I sense the friends of my spirit. I need nothing more."

"I am only a recognized Asin. You didn't know. I realized it from your innocent question in the garden, and I was foolish enough to feel hurt by it."

"Neither you nor I can undo what has happened, Warga," the warrior replied without hesitation. "We cannot turn back the tribal history of the Northern race, cannot erase the guilt of our parents, cannot pump dark blood from our veins and replace it with light. Whoever is of mixed blood stands at the crossroads of the spirit: to create something new from what is, or to let what was and what exists run its course, to the bitter end. Ask yourself the question: renewal from the Nordic spirit, or further descent into the unfreedom of blood and soul."

"The question and answer are ancient, and have been considered a thousand times before," replied Warga, her heart pounding. "Many before us have sought a solution, through negotiation, through prohibition, through violence. What was the result? And now you, too? A sword-bearer calls for the sword."

Baldur Wieborg shook his head.

"Is not the sharpness of the mind, of conviction, of crystal-clear clarity also a cutting weapon—sometimes better than the dead blade that hangs at my side?" he asked calmly.

"It is easy to talk of new goals at the linden canal, but a look at our Asgard and the city of the High Solar Gate in Urd makes the weight of historical facts bear down more heavily than a gardener—or indeed a sword-bearer like Wieborg—might suspect."

"That pleases me very much," said the captain with a sigh of relief. Warga looked at her friend in surprise.

"I don't understand what pleases you."

"Beside your presence, this insight from a gardener," smiled the captain. "It's rare. Most people do not know such difficulties, and if they recognize them, they are too weak to master them. To know, to recognize, and to master—that is what I need. In you, as well. Now, let's see whether our guests from Tiahusinyu have finished their strawberries."

Wieborg turned to the door of the adjoining room, where the guests were sitting. Under the lintel, which his helmet almost touched, he turned around.

"So, will you be my ally after all?" he asked, compellingly.

"Maybe," replied the gardener, almost against her will.

"I'm still young and don't know women," came the reply, light and cheerful. "But I've been told that with girls, 'maybe' sometimes means 'yes.' Whether that's true for gardeners, I don't know, but I hope so."

"I'll speak with my brother," Warga Gadirus replied.

"But I'll be at the observatory with Odil before you, for after this tour, thanks to the fondness the idol priests of Urd have for me, I have a few hours of free time."

"With a man like Odil, you won't have it as easy as with a little gardener," said the young woman.

"I love independent minds," laughed the captain, and passed through the door.

A few days later, the professor of law, Weeling Ase Gadirus, returned home with a dissatisfied look and searched for his daughter, whom he found in the small garden behind the little pillar hall. She was sitting on the closely cut lawn by the edge of the fish pond, feeding the fish.

"Where did you get such good connections with the High Solar Gate, my child?" asked the scholar, sitting down on the stone edge of the pond.

"Shouldn't my dear father have such connections more than I?" Warga replied innocently, laughing.

"It doesn't seem that way to me," said Gadirus. "Odil told me this morning that the Venerable Father of the High Solar Gate requests my visit. So, I had myself taken out to the temple city of Urd and didn't have to wait long."

Gadirus deliberately paused and watched the girl to gauge the effect of his words. When she remained silent, he continued:

"The Venerable Father asked me whether my daughter, Warga Ase Gadirus, would take on the management of the sacred gardens in the temple city of Urd. The envoys from Cuzco were full of praise, and even Herr Amenor Lochi himself believed he could not place his precious parks in better hands than yours. Whether your brother Odil had a hand in this, I don't know, but it's at least possible. He's chamberlain to the Papa of Urd, after all."

"Odil?" Warga asked in surprise, and couldn't help thinking of Baldur Wieborg, who had said he'd be at the observatory before her.

"Well, I'd be surprised if the boy asked the Gate for a good position for his sister," said the old scholar cautiously. "That's not really his way."

"Maybe he did anyway," said Warga quietly. Weeling Gadirus nodded.

"So you know more, my child, than your father suspected."

"I will not dissuade you, Warga. You know how advantageous high positions at the Gate usually are—that they are posts with special privileges, that instead of our simple dwellings, palaces are provided for the chosen, that our Asic land laws do not apply there, and that houses and land given by the Venerable Father become hereditary property. You know how much I, as your father, would like to see you receive every special treatment, which in Atlantis is granted to only a very few…"

"What does mother say about it?" Warga asked with a smile.

"She agreed."

"So do I, and I will inform the Venerable Father that, with grateful reverence, I accept the high honor," declared the young gardener firmly.

The professor of law lowered his high, white brow. “It is a lifelong commitment, Warga, as long as you fulfill your duty—which I do not doubt,” he said slowly, with a tone of pain. “You will have to come to terms with a religious service full of superstition and priestly delusion, which demands faith in miracles and is based on the deification of priestly overlords. You will also have to accept a host of foreign gods whose names you hardly know. Perhaps your ‘yes’ is purchased too cheaply, even for a brilliant, highly paid position. Whoever enters the High Solar Gate quickly forgets the memory of their free Asic spirit—so they say, the Nordic soul soon learns to walk crooked paths when the body walks the straight streets of the priestly city. And all the floral splendor of the temple gardens cannot replace the trampled white rose of spiritual freedom. Your brother Odil feels the same way, deep down, though he sits in full independence as a scholar at the old solar observatory of Agni, almost beyond the spiritual coercion of the High Gate.”

Warga sat beside her father on the stone edge of the pond and took his slender hand.

“You speak as if you had attended every priestly school in Atlantis and had been dismissed as ‘unfit for the priestly profession,’” she laughed, with a touch of mischief.

“I’m convinced that would have been a very generous judgment, yes, that after the first year of instruction I would have been swiftly returned to civilian life,” replied Weeling Gadirus just as playfully. “And you know, I am not one of those hardened souls whose spiritual frostbite, as a reaction against the excesses of Atlantean god-belief, leads to complete denial of the divine in nature and the human soul. I believe the Nordic race bears a heavy responsibility to the Allvaterly Power—a power we do not know, but sense in the actions and strivings of our souls, our character, our abilities, and which we believe we find in the lawfulness of the divine symbol, the sun; whose essence is not rigid immutability, but flowing development, which will not even stop at the course of the suns, when the time has come.”

“The Venerable Father does not deny the divinity, either,” the daughter interjected, as if to guide the conversation in a certain direction.

“That’s my clever Warga,” replied the professor.

“But clever Warga knows that the counter-pole of the divine lies beneath the threshold—of the High Solar Gate,” the gardener nodded with a half-smile.

Herr Weeling Ase Gadirus took the work-worn hands of his beautiful child in his own and gazed, full of wonder and emotion, into the blue eyes of the young girl. For a moment, the realization dawned on him that his daughter’s

decision to accept the offer from the highest cleric of the Empire might have special, deeper reasons and motives—but then he dismissed the thought. How could it be possible that a young thing like his Warga could think with the purposefulness of a mature man, that she intended to enter the dazzling cage of the High Solar Gate as an enemy, disregarding all the special privileges that service in the priestly administration of the Empire would grant her?

At the entrance to the side canal where Gadirus's house stood, the bell of a small galley sounded, warning of collisions at the intersection of the waterways.

"Mother!" cried Warga Gadirus, pulling her hands from her father's. Father and daughter stepped onto the stone steps and waved back joyfully to the greetings from the boat.

With the agility that comes from years of habit, Warga's mother jumped ashore, and—as was only right, given the good fortune that had come to her daughter—she embraced her beautiful child, as if it were a foregone conclusion that refusing the offer from the High Solar Gate was simply out of the question. And Warga's recent decision proved her right.

"I will ask the Venerable Father to grant me an interview, for I must give thanks for my child's good fortune," she said with a lively energy inherited from the southern blood of her Egyptian ancestors. "Are you happy as well, my girl?" she asked immediately.

"Very much so, Mother," replied Warga Gadirus.

Edmund Kiß

At the War Office

When one had crossed the mighty granite pillar bridge over the innermost ring canal of the city of Atlantis—the canal which, according to Plato's description, surrounded the triple gigantic rampart of the fortress Asgard with a width of six hundred feet—one passed by a double guard of warriors with flashing brass armor into a tunnel-like gate. This pierced the oppressive depth of the lowest wall and opened first onto a narrow courtyard, whose front wall, with its menacing loopholes, dominated the tunnel's exit. The courtyard gave the impression of a shaft lying deep within the earth, and anyone who looked upward could, even in broad daylight, see the stars blinking in the dark blue sky. Yet the courtyard shaft was not dark, for the tin-clad, soaring walls diffused a dim but completely sufficient light onto the floor, which was paved with light gray marble slabs.

Beyond the tunnel's midpoint, further gates on either side led into the interior of the fortress, only to reunite behind the chamber fitted with firing slits and to penetrate the entire mass of the stronghold as a vaulted passage. Beyond this, the tunnel, in a similar arrangement of barriers, reached yet another circular canal, which was also spanned by a covered and tower-fortified pillar bridge, just like on the other side.

Immediately behind the inner defensive bastion, the path rose gently to the right and left of the hall's entrance through two new tunnel gates, so that wagons and riders—though not exactly comfortably—could reach the platforms of the second and third walls. For pedestrians, very narrow and equally steep stone staircases ascended right next to the tunnel gates, each consisting of sixty-eight oversized steps, leading directly, without any turns or landings, to the first of the walkways.

The tunnel and stairway entrances lay under the shadow of the side walls of the courtyard, which, apart from several oak doors with bronze fittings, showed only a row of long and very narrow slanted windows. As bright and radiant as the fortress of the Nordic Asen stood outside in the dazzling sunlight of the eternal spring of the lower latitudes, here within, the martial gravity of a strong-willed ruling people weighed heavily on the soul of every rare visitor granted access to the Troia of Atlantis.

On the echoing slabs of the tunnel courtyard, whose walls—apart from their arrow slits—were enlivened or broken by neither a single bench, nor a single fountain, nor even the most modest wall niche, a guard paced up and down day and night. The strange white light of the gleaming tin-clad walls of the courtyard shaft was reflected in his bronze helmet. With softly clinking weapons at his side, the man calmly and somewhat boredly circled the square of the deep-set courtyard, sometimes stopping before a tall oak door on the left,

above which was engraved the lightning-like victory rune of the Nordic people; for the initiated, this indicated that behind the bronze bosses was the office of the War Ministry. And when the sentry had gazed enough at the all-too-familiar solar symbols of the metal fittings, he would move on with a sigh and pause with more affection before a door on the right, behind which lay his true martial home: the quarters of the three select companies that, according to ancient tradition, formed the peace garrison of Asgard.

It was indeed a great honor to be counted among the sword-bearers and men of the royal Troia, but service in the countless offices and sub-offices, with the directors and state counselors personally, and not least high up in the rooms and halls of the Allvater's fief and the royal palace attached to it, offered little variety—a duty that made great demands on one's patience.

When a new company moved into Asgard as a relief, the joy of finally gaining official access to the mysterious underground and aboveground chambers of the ancient stronghold gave a spiritual lift for two or at most three weeks. But after a comparatively short time, the tall, sun-loving Northmen longed once more for the backs of their fiery horses, for marches through mountains and valleys, for joint exercises with the imperial fleet and subsequent landings on the flat shore of some island state, where with lowered spears they stormed the beach through rolling surf. There, the "enemy" would be curious young girls and half-grown boys standing on the shore, waving joyfully with cloths and wooden swords.

The echoing tunnels, the gloomy courtyards and stone ravines of the royal fortress, the low, cool halls of the quarters—where the bronze field beds, for lack of space, stood four high—, the dining halls with endless rows of stone tables and benches, on which one, quite literally, never got warm from below, weighed on the spirits of the young warriors. For that reason, they greeted the annual change of the guard with never openly shown, but all the greater, inward joy, and from the heart wished their successors the high honor of guarding the king and the scribes in the highest and most important imperial offices. In reality, in these unbroken times of peace, there was nothing at all to guard in Asgard. More than one young squad leader expressed among his brothers-in-arms the outrageous thought that a half-dull night watchman would suffice for all of Asgard—and he should be stationed in the great tunnel behind the pillar bridge, so that he could at least occasionally see the mast tips of a royal galley or merchant ship as they sailed under the bridge arches. Some particularly green lads in helmet and tunic even thought that posting a stuffed dummy with a brass hat and tin sword would be sufficient—but that was all just youthful talk. Not one of the sword-bearers and warriors of Asgard would have wanted to miss his time of guard duty near the imperial king.

Occasionally, there was even some pleasant variety in the otherwise monotonous routine of the days. Suddenly and unexpectedly for the guard, a

king from one of the member states—sometimes even several, from south or north—would appear. The entourage had to be accommodated and received an honor guard; one could overhear fragments of conversations that echoed through the air shafts from the galleries above, and could piece together what the highest dignitaries were plotting in their minds. On such occasions, one could also see noble and very beautiful women, who were usually so curious that the Asgard of Atlantis would have had to be even more uncanny and gloomy to fully satisfy the ladies.

Sometimes, foreign guests with brown, red, yellow, or black skin came—faces anxious, serious, or awkwardly grinning, figures either small or towering, laden with gold and jewels; often, too, coal-black fellows with a very unpleasant smell, sporting crowns of colorful feathers on their greased heads, who brought with them such crowds of ape-like followers that even the truly spacious guest halls by the Asgard's courtyards were sometimes insufficient, and only a fraction of the visitors could be housed in the fortress.

With anxious, suspicious faces they would creep through the main tunnel, and with beaming, grinning faces they would leave again—visibly delighted to have escaped the gloomy maze of halls, tunnels, stairways, and stone ravines. Out on the arch bridge between the short watchtowers, they almost always looked back again, gazing for a long time at the towering stronghold of the white gods, the sun-children of Allvater, and carried the deep, indelible impression of the overwhelming and inescapable power of the Nordic will with them back to their distant homelands in Africa, Gondwana, Tiahusinyu, or India.

The sentry in the silver-glinting hall could, through the entrance tunnel, oversee the wide approach, the so-called Asgard Street, over the pillar bridge into the city itself, could easily observe how the double guard at the Royal Bridge asked all visitors to Troia, so far as they were unknown to them, for their sealed permits, and could recognize from a great distance if a member of the royal house of the Torgaards was arriving.

Although the fortress housed the core government offices of a nation of forty million people, the traffic in its halls and corridors was not particularly lively. An empire which, for millennia, had enjoyed uninterrupted peace in its motherland Atlantis, ruled by a strong hand and clever minds, no longer required new decrees or measures; instead, a few well-established general laws sufficed to give the administration that steadiness and security which always arise when as little government as possible is exercised. Large branches of administration were left to the federal councils and municipalities, and the imperial offices could confine themselves to occasional and invisible intervention whenever friction arose somewhere in the island empire. Only the Imperial Office of War and that of Trade and Shipping were staffed by a greater number of officials, since wars on the borderlands always remained a necessity, and foreign trade

with the border provinces and lands under foreign rule required secure and centralized direction by the Empire.

Thus, when rare footsteps echoed strangely from the dark mouths of the tunnel ends and an official disappeared behind one of the heavy doors, the guard in the hall hardly glanced to see who it might be. Only when a high-ranking military leader clattered across the marble slabs would the sentry at the front wall take his post, resuming his restless patrol once the gentleman had vanished into the maw of a stairwell.

Over the King's Bridge came the chief director of the Imperial War Office, Lord Burgrave Herbing Ase Kopping. He wore a leather military coat, a short riding crop in his hand—for he was returning from a morning ride—and on his white head, a well-worn leather cap, whose only ornament was a gold buckle with a few blue sapphires. Beside him strode his groom with long, broad steps, entertaining his superior with knowledgeable conversation about foal breeding in the first cavalry division of Asgard, and expressing the opinion that the state breeding facility on Guttorn Island should be ashamed of its results compared to those of the cavalry. Though Lord Ase Kopping did not fully share the view of his horse-loving companion, he decided to agree with him in part, cast a scrutinizing look at the golden royal emblem on the top floor of Asgard, and entered the echoing tunnel entrance with heavy boot steps.

The guard in the tin hall had taken his post at the threatening front wall and fixed his gray eyes keenly on the high superior, in whose hands the military fate of several armies of the empire, on the frontiers in all directions of the compass, was united.

"Good morning," said Lord Kopping in a deep voice, which ran up the metal walls of the courtyard gorge like in a speaking tube.

"Good morning, Lord Burgrave," the guard replied expectantly.

"Has the king gone riding?"

"Yes. An hour ago, with Duke Wittmund Acora and Princess Armane, with Lord Gunnar Ase Gepide of the Crown Prince's household as escort."

"Thank you. — Is anyone waiting in the War Office hall?"

"Yes. The chamberlain of the Venerable Father, Lord Odil Ase Gadirus from the Agni Observatory. Lord Armorer Benter Güllmer from the Zimbabuye replacement group. Lady Idane Ase im Brack, the widow of the sword master who fell in the Schoongard uprising, and a cavalry officer I do not know, but he had an official seal of authorization."

"That's good—"

"Good morning, Lord Burgrave."

The head of the War Office entered his domain with the calm indifference of long habit. At the threshold of the heavy oak door, he turned around once more:

"Summon the commander of the third Asgard Company, Lord Baldur Ase Wieborg," he said curtly and closed the door behind him.

A narrow corridor, roofed with massive, overlapping stone slabs, ran along—broken every hundred steps by a narrow shaft for light and air, and curved to follow the gigantic circular structure of the lowest floor—in front of the deep pillar halls and narrow administrative offices, which received their scant light from small windows in the outer ring wall. Through these little windows, one could see shimmering green-yellow canal water and, in the distance, a tangle of rooftops and gardens. Occasionally, a ship's mast with the bulging round of a white sail passed by the small openings, seemingly improbably close, a reminder that the last and innermost navigable canal flowed just behind the thick walls of the War Office. A cold heaviness weighed upon the rooms of Atlantis's most important administrative office, as if the immense pressure of the stone masses above could be physically felt. In any case, it was, outwardly at least, quite possible to keep what is most necessary for the officials of a War Office: a cool head.

The study of Burgrave Herbing Ase Kopping—really more a great hall than a room—was furnished with a simplicity that bordered on austerity, and an uninitiated visitor would not have thought it possible that here, with a few strokes of a stylus on colored leather, the fate of entire peoples somewhere on the vast Earth could be decided—and had often been decided over the many thousands of years of the empire's history.

Massive, age-darkened tabletops of polished andesite, the rounded edges glossy from centuries of use, rested on sturdy square pillars that rose directly, without capitals or ornamental heads, into the rough stone ceiling above. Deep recesses beneath the tabletops made for comfortable seating, and usually the hard, well-scrubbed oak stools were pushed under the tables, so they could be pulled out when larger meetings required more participants to be seated. On these tables lay, partly unrolled, partly stacked in high piles, the maps of the empire drawn on suede—work of the land-survey group, which, in many sub-divisions, worked in the borderlands and on the islands of the motherland and updated any changes to the War Office's maps every five years or so. The sea charts of the high fleet command were also kept in the War Office. Both imperial offices worked together and had to work together, because Atlantis was a sea power, and a fleet without an army, or vice versa, was unthinkable. The

direction of both offices was united in one hand: that of Burgrave Kopping. The sea charts, with their astronomical annotations, were prepared by the imperial solar observatories, which had special school ships for this purpose to ensure that scientific trainees maintained their closeness to nature—possible only through continuous observation under open skies and ever-changing stars. The starry sky had always been the daily bread of longing for the Vikings of the north, and since in the time of Atlantis there were no light disturbances from a moon—because there was no moon yet—observations were possible for the whole duration of the night, unless clouds (which were rare) prevented them.

At one of the small windows stood the burgrave's stone worktable, carved from ordinary andesite lava and polished smooth like the pillar tables. Since the lighting was sometimes insufficient for the old official's aging eyes, a polished brass mirror set deep in the window recess cast the shimmering light reflected from the surface of the water in front of the fortress directly onto his work plans.

The old army leader settled into the heavy wooden armchair that had served whole generations of his predecessors and therefore creaked quietly under the weight of the tall Viking frame, and reached for the few letters that had arrived with the night's express ship from Tiahusinyu. The Burgrave of Aztlan sent his semi-annual report, requested agricultural equipment and high-quality breeding stock, and asked that the attached accounts—covering salaries, material expenses, and tax revenues—be forwarded to the Empire's accounting office. There was also a summary of punishments, several petitions for clemency to the king, a brief list of promotions to higher army ranks in the Tiahusinyu Highland border province, and finally a sketch map of newly opened mining operations in the Andes, which Lord Kopping had requested.

At the door to the adjoining room, a sword clanked against its hanger. A young sword-bearer, condemned to work for a few years in the army office and compensated for it by the conviction—shared by all young assistants—that the smooth functioning of the entire empire was due solely to their own youthful efficiency, stood waiting on the threshold.

Without turning around, the burgrave asked, "Well?"

"Lord Baldur Wieborg awaits orders," replied the sword-bearer in an official tone.

"Yes. Have him wait. — There's also the widow from Schoongard…"

"Lady Idane im Bruck, Lord Burgrave."

"She may come in first," decided the old man, rising to prepare a stool for his visitor.

A young woman appeared, a little nervous, in the pillar hall—which she was entering for the first time in her life—and immediately presented her case in words that were clearly rehearsed. Her husband had been killed during the uprising of the Negro workers on the plantations of the High Solar Gate in Schoongard, and now she was receiving her widow's pension only as the widow of an ordinary squad leader, not as the wife of a sword-bearer, and that wasn't right. Her husband had, after all, been promoted in the meantime, and so...

With the patient kindness natural to old, chivalrous hearts, the burgrave listened to the clearly aggrieved woman, used a pause—while she was catching her breath—to invite her to sit, and then continued to listen with exemplary patience as his guest explained the same matter again in other words. Over the course of her very long speech, the official extracted the essential facts from the abundance of details, and determined that the promotion of the squad leader to sword-bearing knight had been made a few days too late—that is, after his death—at a time when little was yet known in Asgard about the uprising in Schoongard. And while the inexhaustible flow of words washed over the white head of the highest leader of the war office, his hand wrote a few marks with a stylus on thin, colored leather—marks that predated the promotion of the fallen warrior by a few days. And when the black-clad Lady Idane im Bruck finally paused from exhaustion, she learned that an order to the army pay office in Schoongard would be sent off in six days by the "Widder," a vessel of the imperial fleet, as her husband's appointment as sword-bearer had, through an unfortunate error, been made too late.

"By mistake," said the old knight, and Lady Idane was clever enough to know that it had not really been a mistake.

"If you wish, Lady Idane, the captain of the government galley will take you to Schoongard free of charge," said the burgrave. "By the way, a short letter to the office might have sufficed to resolve the matter, but I am glad to have met the widow of a brave knight."

Then Lady Idane suddenly found herself outside, before she quite realized it, and for many weeks afterward was plagued by guilt that she hadn't properly, that is, at greater length, thanked the charming old gentleman.

"I request the presence of the High Chamberlain Gadirus and Swordbearer Wieborg," the burgrave ordered his attendant.

The summoned men entered.

When the three men had taken their seats at the worktable, the burgrave drew a folded document of gossamer-thin leather from his pocket and carefully spread it out before him. Resting his head in his broad, white hand, he studied

the lists of names for a long time—names written in very small script, one beneath the other—and read out the name Odil Ase Gadirus, which appeared among the entries, half aloud.

The stargazer from the Agni observatory, high up on the crater rim of the extinct volcano Urdgram, smiled at the swordbearer Baldur Wieborg.

"This is very unpleasant for me," said Herbing Ase Kopping, more to himself than to his guests. Then it grew quiet again in the cool pillared hall, broken only by the long-drawn call of a sailor outside the open window, calling out some message to his captain.

"At any rate, I am very grateful to you, Lord Chamberlain," the burgrave continued. "It's not unimportant to know about such matters." And then, after another pause, came the question: "When did the royal family members listed here join the secret society?"

"The brother of His Majesty the King was already a member when, at Baldur Wieborg's suggestion, I allowed myself to be admitted a year ago. The Duke, however, and the king's son Siegbert were initiated six weeks ago," replied Odil Gadirus matter-of-factly.

"So the crown prince as well!" grumbled the burgrave in displeasure. He was visibly embarrassed. Then he thought for a while and made a hesitant decision—one he didn't really mean, but which seemed, for the moment, a possible way out:

"We ought simply to hand the whole matter over to the Imperial Security Office. What do you think, Baldur?"

The young sword-bearer kept an impassive expression, though he would have liked to laugh.

"You only have to order it, Lord Burgrave, but I fear it would not be a satisfactory solution," Wieborg replied, and added, "However, if you want my own opinion—which, as is typical for young people, is formed without regard for high personages—I am ready to give it."

The old man raised his hand in a beseeching gesture, though his smile showed how well he knew his subordinate Baldur Wieborg, and that he already anticipated his opinion: "I'd rather hear your view as though you'd grown up in the immediate service of the royal court, and understood how to reckon with the towering difficulties this unpleasant matter brings."

"This case undoubtedly belongs to another office," replied Baldur clearly. "We could easily take the easy way out. But that's not why I got my

friend Odil Gadirus to bring this question of secret societies before you as head of the Imperial Office. We soldiers are not security police for crimes and offenses—we only defend the imperial frontiers against the external enemy. If we handed this document to the Security Office in Asgard, it would result in a quick resolution—one that would be very welcome to certain parties…"

"I know," Herr Kopping interjected with annoyance. "I've read the name of the head of the Security Office and several high officials on the list. Acora's example has quickly become a precedent. If we hand over this document to the competent authority, it will disappear forever. Does the king know about this?"

The last question was not really meant to be answered, so the burgrave was surprised when he heard a firm "Yes." He felt as if he hadn't quite understood what the young sword-bearer Wieborg had unexpectedly—and undesirably—said. The high war official looked up in surprise and fixed his piercing old eyes on the younger man.

"Yes," repeated Wieborg imperturbably.

There was a long, oppressive silence. A ship's bell rang out, muffled at first and then suddenly shrill as the galley passed beneath the window. But only for a moment; then the sound was swallowed up and faded away.

"Proof!" commanded Herr Ase Kopping curtly.

"Princess Armane overheard His Majesty scolding the Duke," the sword-bearer reported calmly.

"I see," said Kopping. "So matters of the highest state importance are relayed to a sword-bearer in Asgard by the daughter of the crown prince's duke."

For the first time, the radiant smile for which his friends liked to call him by his first name, Baldur, crossed the serious features of the young warrior.

"It was a curious coincidence, Lord Burgrave," he said, at once returning to a serious, official tone. "Lady Armane is a young girl and, even last year, always wanted to play ball with me whenever I came through the gardens of the Allvater's estate during my rounds. And this year it hasn't changed much. The noble lady may no longer show that she is still a child, but she is always there when I walk through the park, and then she tells me this and that, and I listen. Sometimes, things come out that are of state importance. So she told me that the Imperial King had scolded the crown prince because he had allowed himself to be initiated into the Holy Order. The Allvater's estate itself trembled during the scolding. I answered cautiously that, as I had heard, the Order was

under the patronage of the Venerable Father in Urd, so why was His Majesty so angry? The princess did not know. But I was satisfied, for I now knew the opinion of the Imperial King and also the membership of Duke Wittmund Acora. Later, my friend Odil Gadirus confirmed it for me."

"I'd rather not attach as much significance to the matter as I thought I had to at first," declared the head of the Imperial War Office, making it clear he intended to drop the issue. But as Wieborg had not yet been silenced, he cautiously remarked that there was only one oath in Atlantis, and that was the Oath of Asgard, sworn to the Imperial King. If commoners without royal obligations swore a special oath to the Lord of the High Solar Gate or his representatives, obliging them to absolute and blind obedience in spiritual matters—and perhaps even in some worldly ones—then for the time being, that was their business. But if members of the Imperial Army swore such an oath, it was more than questionable, for one would have to ask which of the two oaths held validity in a case of conflict. At the very least, such a double oath would have to lead to inner conflict, especially if one of those oaths was a blind one, on which could be demanded whatever the High Solar Gate wished.

"You're being a bit pessimistic, dear Baldur," said Lord Kopping, though he could not quite escape the force of the young man's words. "To my knowledge, the oaths of the secret brotherhoods do not pertain to matters that contradict the law—at least, that is quietly assumed during the swearing of the oath."

"I don't think I'm being pessimistic, but—if you'll pardon the sharp contrast—crystal clear," replied the sword-bearer, and for the first time, he lost some of the external composure required when dealing with high government offices. "The Venerable Father of Urd, but even more so his spiritual counselors and high chamberlains—I could name as many as you like, whose names I learned from my ally Odil Gadirus, but will refrain for now—have, for decades, perhaps since the beginning of the last century, consciously and systematically covered the islands of the Empire and the borderlands with a network of secret societies that do not correspond to our Asic ways, that are the opposite of what our Nordic soul demands: freedom of spirit, purity, clarity, honor. — What is priestly power? The spreading of superstition and fear of ghosts. What is ritualistic magic? Fuzzy fanaticism. Who created the vengeful gods of the underworld, who are supposed to avenge the crimes of corrupt humanity? Not we Northlanders. We can recognize, without the help of priests, where the sandal pinches us in our character. For us, honor and responsibility before the divine part in our own breast are enough to lead us to live in a way appropriate to our blood and soul. Who has shamefully corrupted our natural solar worship into deification, so that now the death of innocent animals is supposed to atone for human weakness? From the slaughter of animals, it is only a short step to human sacrifice. There are more than enough examples among the lower-race

border peoples; and no one learns such repugnant folly faster than idol priests who must absolutely paint over the free, pure spirit…"

"Lord Baldur Ase Wieborg," the burgrave interrupted his young subordinate, his white, ring-adorned hand rising and falling in an almost imperceptible gesture, "when we soldiers talk about the relationship between the state and the Gate, we are always a bit biased. — You see, Baldur, if I were a young sword-bearer and Asgard-Ase like you, and we were what I hope we still are today—namely, friends and like-minded souls—then my heart and Viking spirit would have flown straight to your breast, as if Baldur Wieborg were a maiden of irresistible charm. But now you see an old fellow before you, and white hair is always, or at least usually, skeptical, mistrustful, and cautious. The older I have become, the less often I have forbidden things. When one is young, one always wants to forbid, and thinks that's the art of ruling men. With prohibitions—or even violence—secret societies can only be suppressed for a short time. In that respect, they're like a plant in Lady Warga Gadirus's sacred garden: you cut it back, and shouldn't be surprised when it shoots up twice as vigorously."

"And what about cutting it at the root, Lord Burgrave?"

Herbing Ase Kopping laughed:

"There's the sword of youth again."

"It means spirit and word. — The rest can, under certain circumstances, be handled by the bronze blade. But that probably won't even be necessary if countermeasures are set in motion in time. A professorship at the Imperial Academy for General Spiritual Sciences in Atlantis would be enough for me to start with…"

"Baldur, Baldur, your mind treads a dangerous path," replied the old burgrave. "I'll freely admit to you that it's a path I don't wish to take. I know the force of thought. It won't let go, it's tenacious as a fever-fly, and always comes back. — And the rest? The High Solar Gate has already extinguished many a fire-spirit who approached priestly power with a flame, hoping to burn out what called most loudly for the blaze."

"There are flames that are hard to put out," countered Baldur Wieborg with forced calm. "Yes, for them the water is welcome—they cast it about themselves in showers of sparkling mist…"

"The king recently spoke of your transfer to the border province of Mitteland," Herr Kopping interrupted the young sword-bearer. Baldur nodded impassively.

"To burn out the flame," he said coolly. "In the border province of Mitteland, we have war, and beyond the waterway of the Sky-Bearer, there's room for heads deemed troublesome. I know the ancient custom, and I'm the last to scorn it, for it has proven itself. I've expected such a transfer, and that's why I spoke to you, Lord Burgrave, about my concerns. They are the worries of a greenhorn, inexperienced in administration and statecraft. But I have the impression that I've only put into words what you've known for a long time, and what your own troubled thoughts circle around. They are in good hands with the Burgrave of Asgard. If I thought otherwise, I would have remained silent."

"How skillfully you stroke an old warrior's white hairs!" smiled Herr Kopping.

"Blond maiden's heads and white hair often invite such things," replied Baldur Wieborg in the same tone. "Opposites are drawn to each other by a mysterious force—one hand here, the other there."

"It seems we have left the practical ground of our discussion," said the burgrave, suddenly serious and cold.

"Then allow me to lead us back to business," replied Herr Wieborg. "But this time, Lord Chamberlain Odil Gadirus will have to speak, and I may listen."

The head of the War Office fixed his old, gray, eagle eyes expectantly on the stargazer from the Agni Observatory, who had meanwhile unfolded a celestial map on which the then-known and visible constellations of both hemispheres were marked.

"Not too scholarly!" pleaded the old man. "We might feel too small before you, Lord Chamberlain, and our self-esteem would suffer."

Odil Ase Gadirus assured him with a smile that he would try not to be too scientific. He would speak only of familiar things—namely, the wandering star Heldung, which was named after its first discoverer almost thirty thousand years ago, and which received this name on an occasion that brought grave consequences for the city and the islands of the Empire of Atlantis.

"I know," nodded the burgrave. "At a past passage of the small wandering star Heldung, floods and earthquakes caused immense damage. The blame was placed on the small celestial body. The stargazers of those days were divided in their opinions. — And now?"

"I suspect that a near coincidence of the Earth's aphelion and the perihelion of the wandering star Heldung will have similar effects as thirty thousand years ago," explained Lord Odil Ase Gadirus with indifferent calm, as

if it were just a scientific discussion and not an event that could bring unforeseen disaster to the world.

"The matter is unclear," interjected the burgrave.

"It will suffice if I share the opinion of several heads of the Empire's observatories," continued Odil Gadirus. "The dangerous approach of the two stars—Earth and Heldung—will occur in exactly five years. The orbital periods of both wanderers have been established so precisely through millennia of observation that we are even able to specify the number of days on which the star Heldung, with a slight excess of speed, will sweep past Earth from the outside…"

"Once again, this is a bit difficult…" grumbled the old man. "Did you understand everything, Baldur?"

"Yes, Lord Burgrave," the sword-bearer confirmed. "My friendship with Odil Gadirus has borne fruit. But I assure you, I put my friend's patience to a tough test, and I regret that the nerve in my brain for understanding astronomy is lacking in capacity."

The burgrave hid a smile and asked for the lecture to continue.

"This time, the dangerous approach will not reach the degree that our people experienced thousands of years ago," continued the stargazer from Agni. "And when the threatening days have passed, we'll have several more millennia until such a dangerous proximity recurs. I intentionally say 'dangerous' proximity, because we know that less dangerous encounters are more frequent. — The first time the event occurred in its severe form, the Aesir people and their leadership were caught by disaster, and the relief measures came too late. It's said that hundreds of thousands of people drowned then, because the approach of the uncanny star Heldung seems to cause a movement of the waters, the causes of which we do not—or rather, do not yet—understand. When the event repeats in a few years, we are better off than before, for we know the danger and will have the opportunity to protect ourselves in some way. In the secret societies and priestly schools, knowledge of the coming danger is already being exploited, though not in the way it ought to be—namely, by unifying disaster response under the direction of the Empire—but in the currently popular form of spiritual intimidation and threats of punishment from heavenly or infernal powers for the supposed corruption of mankind. Already next year, at a less dangerous near-passing of the two wandering stars, Earth and Heldung, we will have the opportunity to observe again how the High Solar Gate will exploit the event. In my capacity as spiritual chamberlain of the Pope of Urd, I could provide further details, but I believe I can assume these matters are essentially known. It is not my role here to endorse or reject the views of the High Solar Gate, but only to make suggestions to the head of the Imperial War Office as to

how to confront the danger of the particularly fateful Heldung approach in five years' time. The implementation of any measures is then the task of the Empire."

"Quite right," affirmed the burgrave with a slight nod of his white head. "It's the affair of the High King himself and the kings of the states. That the initiative comes from the War Office is obvious, since the army and navy are the empire's principal forces of order, and the carrying out of major decisions by the king's council must fall to them. The High Solar Gate will, in this case, be forced to submit unconditionally to the king's will. Dear Baldur, there's no need to hide your smile by lowering your head—I see it anyway. And now I see more clearly. The Venerable Father has an enemy in his own ranks, for after today's conversation, it is to my personal satisfaction that Lord Chamberlain Gadirus is a champion of the Asic spirit. Your move regarding the secret societies, which enjoy the protection of the Venerable Father or local priesthoods, seems closely connected with the impending passage of the wandering star Heldung."

At the door to the adjoining room, the belt chain of the young assistant rattled. The burgrave turned around, annoyed.

"I do not wish to be disturbed," he said coldly.

"The Duchess…"

"What about her?" asked the old man, now a bit more kindly.

"The Duchess orders Lord Baldur Ase Wieborg to the castle after his morning duties," reported the young man. "Princess Armane Acora wants to show Lord Baldur the tiny songbirds that the natural history research group from Tiahusinyu has sent."

"Very well," smiled the burgrave, casting a sidelong glance at the leader of the Third Asgard Company. "Did you hear that, Baldur?" he asked. "The royal child calls for her towering knight."

"By command of the Duchess," replied Wieborg, laughing.

The old man's white hand rose and waved back and forth, as if to show how well he knew the young sword-bearer.

"We're finished," he then said. "The empire's observatories will be notified directly by the king, as they must, of course, be summoned to the royal council this time. I thank you both. — Good morning."

With that, the friends were dismissed and left the pillared hall of the War Office. Baldur ducked his head beneath the door lintel, whose glass-hard

stone loomed dangerously close to his crown, and followed Chamberlain Odil Gadirus, the slender, slightly shorter scholar, through the antechamber and into the floored corridor.

The young assistant returned to Herr Kopping.

"Armorer Benter Gullmer…" he reminded him of the waiting official from the replacement group for the border province of Zimbabuye in Africa. The head of the War Office shook his head.

"Come closer first, Sword-bearer Adelger," he said kindly. "Do you like being my assistant?"

"Yes, Lord Burgrave," the young man confirmed—what else could he have said?

"Would you like to command an Asgard company for a year or two? Perhaps the third, which Baldur Wieborg now leads?"

Sword-bearer Adelger Ase Gaatland blushed to the roots. He was to become commander of a guard unit at the royal castle of Asgard? To have access at any time to the golden apartments of the Allvater's estate? There was no hesitation.

"If you would recommend me to the king for this position…"

"Then draw up the certificate," the old man interrupted his assistant with a kindly smile. "Also, the transfer request for Baldur Wieborg and his reassignment certificate to your current post as assistant in the War Office. The key to the storeroom, where the copper bottles of liquid blasting-fire are kept, you will hand over to your successor in my presence. — That's all. I'll take the documents up to the king later. Now I would like to see Armorer Gullmer."

The Songbirds

Meanwhile, the friends parted ways in the pillared courtyard. The chamberlain of the Venerable Father of Urd left the Asgard to return to Agni, while Baldur Wieborg entered the quarters of his company to change clothes for his visit to Duchess Wittmund Acora.

The helmet of the Asgard guard still had the ancient shape—perhaps inherited from their Nordic ancestors, who once came to Atlantis in narrow open boats, to lay their heavy Viking fists upon new land by the right of the stronger. On each side, two silver eagle wings rose high above the helmet crest, and beneath the chin was fastened a broad chain band of fine, interwoven gold rings. Across his chest, three wide brass bands encircled the leather cuirass; at his side hung an ancient sword, its short hilt crowned with golden double spirals, and on his legs were bronze greaves running from knee to sandal-straps.

This armor didn't look bad on a young sword-bearer, and Baldur Wieborg was young enough to take pleasure in his fine eagle-helmet. He had no inkling that today would be the last time he wore it. The silver sword chains still jingled at his side with martial music; the leather of his cuirass still creaked with each step under the rubbing of the chest bands, which looked like pure gold but were really only of steel-hard brass. He was still the carefree, much-envied Asgard-Ase. There were only three such men in the whole Empire! That's why the strides of the tall farmer's son bounced lightly up the steep stairs to the first gallery, as if there were no heaviness at all on the beautiful earth of Atlantis. Up there, one had the first view out over the sprawling world city of Atlantis in the lowlands, and there, too, stood his little stone house, shaded by low trees behind the high battlements—just two small rooms and a kitchen. There was also an ornamental and vegetable garden, which Baldur Wieborg, out of old love and attachment to his father's farming profession, kept in exemplary order during his plentiful free time. Around the entire circumference of the first castle terrace, house stood by house—some a bit larger, others tiny like that of Sword-bearer Baldur Wieborg; but all nestled amid flowering, shady bushes behind neat gardens. Here lived most of the married officials and warriors of the Asgard, and the circular layout—dictated by the shape of the ring-fortress—had the look of a single immense flower garden, a cheerful wreath of roses and orchids encircling the mighty, legendary castle of Atlantis.

The usual way up to the second circular platform again led through a similar tunnel and more inner stairways or sloping ramps. But Baldur had no need to use those paths. As an Asgard-Ase, he had free access to the imperial armories, which took up the entire inner space of the second-story ring. A guard in a brass cuirass and eagle helmet, standing before the wide bronze gate—the entrance to the storerooms where weapons for several hundred thousand warriors were kept, as well as the war machines for the fortress's defense and

countless bolts for long-range weapons—immediately recognized Sword-bearer Baldur Wieborg and let him in without question.

Despite plenty of ventilation from encircling windows and numerous exhaust shafts, the pillar-supported halls of the military storehouse always smelled of musty leather and rancid grease. The demand for leather armor and boots in the border provinces had always been so great, thanks to frequent wars, that the leather gear never hung more than a few years on the endless rows of brass rods. Old quartermaster Heunig Schulde was even rumored to fall ill whenever too many fresh shipments of leather goods arrived from the civilian workshops of the imperial islands, since he needed the musty air just as other people needed the scent of the forest or the salty breath of the open sea.

"Heunig Schulde, the key!" Baldur's voice boomed through the seemingly deserted pillar halls, and the echo grumbled back, annoyed, among the chunky quadrangles of the ceiling supports, circling the whole structure so that the young warrior had the usual amusement of hearing his cheerful call come back to him—this time sullen and angry—from two directions, after it had traveled around the ring of the second story. And the call had its effect. Hardly had Baldur's eyes adjusted to the half-darkness of the armories, when he saw, appearing and sometimes vanishing between the stone pillars, the dark figure of Quartermaster Schulde of the Asgard. With the certainty of long practice, the official scrambled through the narrow corridors between rows of pillars and spear racks, finally reaching the knight, greeting him with a comradely handshake, and handing him the key to the trapdoor exit.

This exit was set in the ceiling beneath the garden of the royal palace. Steep wooden stairs led upward amid shelves for helmets and cuirasses right up to the stone ceiling. At the top, a heavy wooden trapdoor swung open effortlessly, counterbalanced by a rolling lead weight, and Baldur Wieborg found himself before a dense wall of flowering bushes. The trapdoor closed with a soft click behind him. Baldur looked around curiously. Was the royal child Armane already waiting for him?

Indeed, there was a rustling nearby, the bushes parted, and a slender, tall young girl peered into the shadows, looking for her favorite playmate.

"That was quick, Baldur," she said, her voice trying in vain to hide a little burst of joy. Just a year ago, the princess would have let out a cheer whenever the tall captain emerged from the trapdoor. But now she was seventeen, still a real child at heart as a Nordic girl, but, as a royal lady, expected to be reserved. And that was very difficult.

"Baldur!" Armane continued quickly. "You have to hide my ball. You know Mother doesn't want me playing ball with you anymore, now that I'm grown up. But I brought it anyway, hoping maybe we still could…"

"So, open defiance!" said Baldur Wieborg sternly, putting on his best schoolmaster's face.

"Oh, stop it!" the girl laughed. "Just hide my ball. I can't keep it under my fine dress."

"Yes, but where should I put it?" Baldur asked, concerned. "If I put it under my armor in the pocket, it'll make such a lump that the duchess will call for the house doctor when she sees me."

"That doesn't matter," decided the young lady. "Mother just came from the Allvater's estate and is expecting you. She's on her way here, and I was just a bit faster. She knows your trapdoor staircase as well as I do. — Baldur, take off your helmet!"

"Yes, but…" the unhappy Asgard-Ase tried to object, but it was no use.

"Quickly dear, good Baldur, take off your helmet!"

Young captains melt quickly and easily when fair-haired young girls with delicate red lips plead. He took off the helmet and had to hide the ball underneath it. And when he set the tall eagle-helm back on his head so that the chin-chain could barely be fastened again, he hit upon a simple, obvious solution: to simply stash Armane's ball somewhere in the bushes until the maternal threat had passed, so they could easily find it later. But now it was too late. Footsteps crunched on the white gravel path.

Baldur carefully wobbled his head. The ball was big enough not to roll around on top of his head. Feeling reassured, he went to meet the Duchess-heir.

Lady Irwing Acora, still looking quite youthful, wife of the heir Wittmund Ase Torgaard, concealed a smile as Herr Wieborg bowed over her little, jewel-studded hand. She knew well her daughter Armane's childish infatuation—an infatuation that seemed, this year, to be turning into something more—and had decided to be a bit cool today toward the young Asgard captain, even if it wasn't easy for her. One really had to force oneself, as a woman, to be cross with a mariner like Baldur. The fact that he had come through the trapdoor was an old tradition; the duke had laughingly permitted it, and she herself, at least in earlier years, had never objected to the shortcut. It was always quite amusing when, in the past, slender little Armane would sit like a lurking wildcat by the trapdoor, listening for her playmate below in the storeroom to call for the key. And when she heard him, she would repeat the shout "Heunig Schulde, the key!" at full volume, and the whole Allvater's estate knew Baldur Wieborg was climbing up to the castle garden for ball games and tag.

Today, her little daughter hadn't called, even though she'd heard everything happening down in the Asgard armory. Armane seemed to be improving. But, if the Duchess was honest—and sometimes she was—she couldn't really believe in such improvement. She was even honest enough to admit to herself that, were she in Armane's position, it would have been hard to reconcile outer and inner reason.

"Armane's tiny little songbirds you are to see, Herr Baldur Wieborg," said the Duchess with deep seriousness, as if it were a matter of the utmost importance. Her blue eyes rested coldly and distantly under her diadem-adorned white brow.

The young sword-bearer also let all cheerful sparkle fade from his gray eyes and directed his steel-gray, eagle gaze firmly and with icy respect into the eyes of the noble lady.

"Oh, how fierce you suddenly look, Baldur!" the princess cried in alarm. It was hard enough for Baldur to look that way, but he could feel the forced hostility of the noble lady, and his open character involuntarily bristled against it. Yet, at the same instant he heard the voice of his dear princess, that golden spark lit up again in the depths of his compelling gray eyes—the very secret of the childlike radiance of this man's being. When that spark went out, his eagle-like features froze into a block of willful, predatory energy, and those pale, icy-clear eyes could force many a foe to look away, who otherwise never would.

That a kind-hearted woman—which the duchess truly was at heart—should feel a slight shudder under such a gaze, could hardly be surprising. Baldur Wieborg really wasn't quite right to answer the high lady's intended coldness with a heart-freezing iciness of his own, but he instinctively sensed an enemy in the wife of Acora (as the heir to the throne was traditionally called), for no other reason than that he couldn't forgive the duke, as a pure-blooded Ase, for submitting himself to the sacred secret order of the Revered Father of Urd.

Baldur Wieborg also thought he understood the underlying reasons. The relationship between the duke and the king was not particularly warm, for whatever reasons. For the high priest of the realm, it wouldn't be difficult to exploit this rift—especially since Acora was a sensitive, easily irritable soul, who suffered under his royal father's sarcasm and harshness. Highly gifted as an artist, a skilled sculptor, and a lover of music, dreamy and lacking the natural clarity of mind of his Nordic ancestors, the duke was easily won over to the mysterious half-light of secret, cultic worship. That the duchess, with her straightforward and clear nature, could never be drawn into the not-quite-wholesome secret cult of bound idol-celebrations—this Baldur Wieborg did not yet suspect. In his still very young soul, he believed that husband and wife must

always form a unity, even in such matters; and in this respect, he was still the "greenhorn" he had recently called himself before the head of the war office.

The frightened outcry of the princess Armane melted the ice that the seemingly hostile coldness of the duchess had frozen around Baldur Wieborg's heart, and so Lady Irwing Acora at once had the chance to witness a lightning-quick change in him—for which she was involuntarily grateful.

"I have been looking forward to seeing the little creatures," the captain explained. "Lady Armane has often told me how impatiently she awaited the arrival of the ship from the natural science expedition, which was to bring these tiny birds."

"Lady Armane!" the princess repeated, offended. She knew perfectly well that, as a young lady, she was entitled to that honorary title, but from the mouth of her beloved playmate, the word sounded utterly absurd.

"Child, Herr Wieborg is quite right," the duchess said kindly, but with a gentle reproach, as a mother was finally obliged to give. "A grown princess—"

"But he's just Baldur!" Armane objected. "He doesn't need to call me by that silly title 'Lady,' as if I were some withered old court dame."

Baldur Wieborg thought of the ball under his helmet, and privately could only agree with his young, slender friend. As long as he remained the secret confidant of her youthful mischiefs, the respectful "Lady" didn't seem quite right to him either. Nevertheless, he felt obliged, much to his regret, to side with the mother's view—even considering the fact that he was "only" Baldur. But he avoided looking at his princess, who had to walk on the other side of the duchess and tried in vain, by tilting her head, to catch a reassuring glance from her knight.

"Where are the little songbirds kept?" asked the sword-bearer, hoping to steer the conversation away from the slightly awkward topic.

For the time being, the little creatures were sitting in a cage made of golden wire mesh, which had been set up for some time in the large flower meadow in front of the palace terrace. The duchess explained that the High King had just come out of the Allvater's estate and was now looking at the wonder from Tiahnsinyu. Baldur Wieborg breathed a sigh of relief. He had feared the rare feathered captives were being kept inside the Allvater's estate, which would have made it unavoidable for him to remove his eagle helmet. As long as he could remain outside, all would be well.

The last trees and bushes of the royal park gave way to a view of the golden splendor of the Asgard palace of Atlantis, the castle of the Nordic god-men, the children of the pure sun.

Baldur had seen the palace many times before, but each time he was shaken by the overwhelming brilliance—an extravagant wealth of precious building materials that had made the Allvater's estate into what people across the world spoke of: the dwelling of the divine on earth.

The circular layout of the royal building was made almost unrecognizable by a double axis, set at right angles to each other, for at the end of each axis was a triple-columned hall with a rectangular floor plan—thus not following the original roundness of the central structure. Although these halls were later additions, built on in front of the ancient round core of the Allvater's estate, the Atlantean architects had managed to completely disguise the nature of these annexes, for the gently sloping gable roofs of the added halls blended smoothly into the circular roof of the core building, as if all of it had been cast from a single mold.

White and gold set the dominant mood for the overwhelming structure, and only the undersides of the roof overhangs, the undersides of the massive stone beams above the shimmering columns, and the depths of the fluted grooves just below the pillar ends and column capitals were shaded in clear Atlantean blue. And it was precisely this bright blue that lent a hint of lightness to the solemn grandeur of the palace—a touch needed for a residence meant for people, and, after all, that's what the Allvater's estate on Asgard was supposed to be: a place fit for living.

At the height of the main cornice began the lavish use of the most precious building material humanity had ever possessed: gold. Between the console-like, triple-slotted underpinnings of the roof's overhang, garlands of red-glowing flowers alternated in gigantic square panels with sculptural depictions from the history of the realm, and the rich color of the precious metal glowed and sparkled with an almost living effect in the deep shadows cast by the southern sun upon the beams. The immense, tiered main cornice stretched as the final, snow-white stroke—a horizontal band of shimmering silk—across the columned hall, and above it, in the dazzling sunlight, there shimmered and flashed, blinding and unbearable, the roof covered with massive gold plates. It seemed as if here in Atlantis the entire gold reserve of the ancient earth had been gathered, just good enough to crown the venerable fortress of the Asen; here, incalculable wealth was heaped, with a contemptuous disregard for dead matter, atop the radiant white of marble giants and the rounded, polished columns of translucent alabaster—as if the material values of this world were only an attempt at a metaphor for the true essence contained within the fortress of the Asen: spirit, will, power.

But between the columned halls, something blazed with fiery brilliance. There, before the dazzled gaze, lay the unprecedented wonder of Asgard, lay the enchanting spectacle of undreamt-of splendor, before which the envoys of foreign nations buckled, because all their own homeland's pomp faded in comparison to what, under the open sky of the central hall of Atlantean Troy, bathed the eye in light. Jewel-encrusted, gold-laden, colossal in its proportions and fantastical in the audacity of its artistic effect, the riot of color in the Hall of Poseidon glowed behind the silent white of the forehall. Encrusted with bluish diamonds—almost invisible was the base of solid gold—the statue of the sea god, with his rising four-horse chariot, soared to ten times the height of a man, up to the circular recess of the ceiling with its silver-glimmering consoles, above which, as a natural domed roof, the blue sky stretched—just as the world empire of Atlantis was a roof over both hall and earth. The image of the ruler of the sea was merely a symbol, not a god who was worshipped as divine, but an expression of the royal Viking men's gratitude for the workings of the divine in their history. The sea, since the days of the forefathers, had been the field of honor and success for this seafaring people, and through the sea they would one day perish—magnificent and mighty, as they had lived.

Alternating with mermaids, whose garments shimmered with colorful gemstones, stood the solemn, rigid statues of the Atlantean royal ancestors, life-sized, heavy and massive, made of gold—of pure, yellow-red gold. And the pillar hall, which extended up to the columned portico, was constructed in ceilings and walls of yellowish ivory, divided into enormous, deeply shadowed coffers, the edges of the coffers bordered with blood-red rubies and black, flickering diamonds.

Almost modest, and striking only due to their enormous dimensions, the square pillars of the ancient pillared hall stood at regular intervals, of which it was said they, too, were made of solid gold.

But in the yellow-white ivory of the walls and dividing ceilings was reflected the reddish gleam, as if the hall soared to unheard-of heights; with seal-like brilliance, the golden, elongated pillars were also reflected in the floor, whose iridescent mother-of-pearl mosaics alternated with slabs of rose-colored agate, playing a symbolic game of splendor and color—a game that bordered on arrogance and madness in its extravagance.

Like an incomprehensible, enchanting dream, like a mirage from an unearthly world, this Allvater's domain must have appeared to every foreign visitor, when he beheld the symbolic splendor, the utter disregard for cost in the use of priceless quantities of the rarest and most select building materials, and compared it to the equally royal simplicity in which almost all other rooms of the Asgard were furnished. The deliberate austerity of the offices and workrooms, the almost meager fittings of the imperial departments with interiors and equipment, the conspicuous disdain for ostentation—even among members

of not only the state kings' families but that of the imperial lord Torgaard of Asgard himself—often left an impression on the envoys of foreign governments that could resemble that of hard-won wars.

With full justification, the foreigner would involuntarily recognize the iron strength of a governing idea, would recognize in the almost silent workings of the government the force of a will forged hard and directed towards a single goal: the state. And for the state, there was a symbol for which all the earth's treasures seemed altogether insufficient, to which all other symbols—whatever they were called—inevitably converged:

The Asgard of Atlantis.

It is telling, therefore, that the constitution of this world empire was unanimously regarded as "admirable" throughout the entire earth, without the inner essence of the quietly working leadership in the empire and its constituent states needing to be understood. Even writers who, tens of thousands of years later, wrote about Atlantis adopted the designation "admirable" in their history books, though they could hardly have any idea how the workings of such a colossal clockwork, like the administration of a world empire, actually operated.

The visible symbol of the pillared hall, dominated by the giant, diamond-encrusted image of the Atlantic Ocean, thus remained for all time the emblem of the best-governed empire on earth—even when Atlantis was spoken of only as legend, when the happy isles of eternal spring had long since lain beneath green waves and new generations and peoples were already struggling over the legacy of Atlantis.

Herr Wieborg returned the salute of the two tall shield-guards who stood motionless at each wing of the columned hall, so that their eagle-helms and breastplates blazed like burning fire in the harsh sun. From blue and gray eyes, the two gazed with hidden curiosity at their captain, who passed by with the Duchess and Princess Armane at a slow pace, giving them an almost imperceptible comradely greeting with his eyes.

After passing nearly halfway around the Allvater's residence with the ladies, Baldur Wieborg soon saw the High King himself, King Warager Ase Torgaard, seated on a linen-covered folding chair before the golden latticework of a spacious cage, watching the strange buzzing and dancing of the insect-sized birds that, for the first time, had survived the sea voyage from their mainland home of Tiahnsinyn to Atlantis. The scientific research team had thus accomplished a feat, for of the several hundred tiny feathered creatures sent, not even half had perished. The utmost care on board, very warm weather, and calm seas had favored the little guests, and now, in the warm sun of the Atlantean spring, they seemed quite at home.

The king turned his mighty white head only slightly as the Duchess and the two young people approached, but it was clear that, even in his reverie, he had already noticed Baldur approaching with the ladies.

"Captain Wieborg," he said curtly. "Glad to see you." Then he devoted his full attention once more to the songbirds, which, with shimmering feathers and long, delicate tails, flitted and tumbled among the flowers of the potted plants inside the aviary.

The princess took the sword-bearer by the hand and drew him closer to the cage, and the scolding gaze of the Duchess was lost hopelessly in the delight of the young girl. Baldur, however, had the vague feeling that he ought not to come too near, and resisted. He cast a pleading glance at the princess, which, fortunately, was understood this time. Without a direct invitation from the king, the captain of Asgard did not wish to approach the cage.

So he stood in silence, gazing at the broad back of his royal lord and the white-yellow hair peeking out from beneath a simple green cloth cap. When Herr Wieborg was still a newcomer to Asgard, he, like almost all young people in Atlantis, had imagined that an High King must always wear something like a crown—or at least a diadem on his head and an ermine cloak on his shoulders. That this was not at all the case, he had since learned. The high lord, about whose ruthless and capricious character many true and untrue stories circulated, now sat here like a country squire, in a green woolen tunic, laced sturdy sandals, and armed with a thin cane, quietly contemplating a birdcage. The only sign for those in the know was the royal ring on the index finger of his right hand, which held the stick; and this ring bore the deeply engraved Hagal rune on an egg-shaped sapphire, which was darker in its lower layers than at the top. The rune thus shone a bright, watery green-blue on a deep-colored background and glowed with a strange fire that seemed to come from within the stone itself.

"Very nice!" said the king, half to himself. "The research group has given me real pleasure here. Must not be forgotten." The lord seemed to be in a good mood. He rarely was. People called him irritable, spiteful. In any case, he had to be treated with caution. At the moment, however, he seemed harmless. So Princess Armane decided to make a small attempt on behalf of her knight Wieborg.

"Grandfather," she said in a clear voice, "may Baldur also look at the little animals?"

The king raised his angular head and slowly turned around in his folding chair. The features of the eighty-year-old man showed something like an amused smile. The white pointed beard twitched at his chin. Ice-gray, cold, and habitually mistrustful eyes fixed on the tall, slender figure of his sword-bearer,

who stood upright beside the Duchess and was curious to see what would happen next.

"So, Baldur is to see the little animals," he repeated more or less the words of his blonde granddaughter. "Baldur may, Baldur should stand next to me, but come quietly and carefully. Otherwise Baldur will startle the little creatures."

Despite the obvious mockery, Wieborg could not be angry with the old man, especially as the king now offered him his broad, wrinkled hand, which was soft and cool, and whose grasp lasted only a very short time.

Baldur stood next to the king, and Armane began her explanations, paying little heed to the presence of her strict grandfather. She only avoided saying "the Baldur" again in his presence; now it always came out very properly as "Herr Baldur." She couldn't quite bring herself to say "Herr Wieborg" yet. But something odd happened. The little birds, which had previously been lively and apparently unafraid in their golden cage, suddenly began to flutter in fear and fly nervously against the wire mesh. In a flash, it occurred to Baldur Wieborg that the helmet with its soaring eagle wings must be to blame. The powerful wings were frightening the tiny creatures.

And already disaster approached.

"Take off your helmet, Wieborg," commanded the king. "You can set it back there on the grass. Animals get frightened."

The captain of Asgard took a few steps back and looked at his princess with an indescribable expression. Armane didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and Baldur didn't know either.

"You are to take off your helmet and then stand next to me again," repeated the king, whose suspicious eyes had, unintentionally, noticed the young man's hesitation.

Baldur Wieborg thought that now fate must take its course, obediently unfastened the broad scale-mail strap under his chin, and saw how the princess covered her red mouth with both hands. Then the captain made a lightning-quick bow, nearly down to the ground—and for the time being, he had hidden both the ball and the secret inside the upturned helmet. With a flourish, the handsome brass helmet landed on the grass, and the ball had the good sense not to roll out.

With a beaming face, his blond, close-cropped hair a bit tousled, Herr Wieborg stepped once more beside his king and looked kindly down into his cold, gray eyes, which rested appraisingly on the young warrior’s brow.

"Helmet presses a bit," grumbled the lord. "Have someone else wear it." Still, the old eyes did not let up.

Baldur had no intention of looking away. Instead, he met his royal master's gaze with such winning friendliness that Warager Ase Torgaard's hard, old face broke into a laugh. He cast a probing look at the helmet, quickly observed the facial expressions of his daughter-in-law and the tall, slender Armane, and then his attention returned to the feathered prisoners.

"Expecting visitors," he said after a while.

Baldur Wieborg took that as a not-too-subtle hint to leave, so he took a step toward where his beautiful eagle helmet lay waiting in the grass.

"Stop. You stay, Herr Wieborg," said the king, stretching out his hand as if to hold the captain back. "Do you know who's coming?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"The Duke and the Papa," the lord clarified briefly.

By "Papa" he meant the Reverend Father Amenor Lochi of the Sun Sanctuary Urd, the chief priest of Atlantis.

"They want to see me grant freedom to the songbirds," continued Warager Torgaard. "Don't like cages. I know how golden walls can steal your breath. Air, freedom, and light, my son! Which is the most important?"

"For the Aesir or for the animals, Your Majesty?" Baldur Wieborg asked calmly.

"For humans, for Aesir," replied the lord, and once again directed his cold eyes up to the captain's bright gaze.

"Freedom of spirit, Your Majesty," Baldur decided. "One creates one's own light and air."

"Well, well!" muttered the prince, whistling softly to himself. "Unfathomable nonsense, Herr Wieborg? Freedom? Freedom of spirit? Know that phrase all too well. Makes me laugh whenever I hear it. Young people toss it around lightly. Think they've said something terribly clever. More often they're fools, muddle-headed. At worst, flatterers with shining eyes."

"Such men are cured out on the borderlands until they've become wise, Your Majesty," replied the captain.

"You'll have the chance to be cured, Herr Wieborg."

"Even for the found, it doesn't hurt…"

"Rather full of yourself, Baldur?" laughed the king.

"The King of Asgard spoiled me in my youth," smiled the swordsman with friendly mockery.

Warager Ase Torgaard rose somewhat stiffly from his uncomfortable folding seat. The old legs weren't quite cooperating anymore. Then he stood facing the captain of his fortress—just as tall as he, but with a slightly bent back—and looked at the young man with mocking, but not unfriendly eyes.

"Once again, the king is to blame for a failed officer," he said good-naturedly. "I can imagine. I have reconciled you, Baldur—Herr Wieborg. Quite right. I just can't help judging by outward appearance sometimes, by the smooth, high forehead that promises a lot. Does it deliver? What's behind it?"

"The ability to think rightly, Your Majesty," replied Baldur Wieborg quickly.

"Leave that to me."

The captain fell silent. He didn't want to contradict, and in any case, the lord hadn't really asked directly. Besides, he had no objection to the king thinking for himself.

"Freedom of mind is nonsense," the old man began anew, as if wanting to lure the Asgard captain onto thin ice. But Baldur was careful not to contradict the king unasked. Herr Warager Ase Torgaard went on right away.

"Every vassal and servant has freedom of mind. I can imagine more than one thinks of his king: That old, white-haired ape whose teeth are falling out. Doesn't bother me, that sort of freedom. I grant it to everyone. Doesn't hurt; not me, not him—so long as he keeps his mouth shut."

The king approached the edge of the lawn where Baldur Wieborg's beautiful eagle helmet lay. But already the princess Armane was standing protectively in front of her little secret's hiding place, innocently turning her back to her grandfather as if she just happened to be standing there. The lord paused in his stride.

"What do you mean by freedom of mind, Baldur Wieborg?" he suddenly asked, looking at the young warrior slyly from the side, as if already anticipating the nonsense about to come forth.

"That which sits behind my forehead, Your Majesty," replied the captain of Asgard.

"No dodging, Baldur," grinned Warager, "be more specific!"

"The ability to think rightly, not just the activity of thinking, Your Majesty," explained Wieborg immediately, pleased that the lord had simply called him Baldur.

"Example!" demanded the old man impatiently.

"The constitution of Asgard is admirable," answered the swordsman without hesitation. "But the thinker with a free mind immediately says: No. It is perhaps good, at best the best on earth."

"Another example," ordered the king.

“The leather goods dealer ‘Nameless’ delivers ten thousand war-coats to the Imperial War Office. For this, he receives just as many royal talers,” said Herr Wieborg, more slowly than before. “The accounts office in Asgard declares the price to be fair. But the war-coats come from the sewing rooms of the priestly schools in Urd. The accounts office’s reasoning lacks freedom of mind, because it knew exactly: the seamstresses in the priestly schools must work for three years without pay, as it’s so nicely called, for the training of orphaned and neglected girls for their future occupation. The price was, in some way, wrong. Somewhere, an unjust profit was pocketed, and the accounts office—supposedly—didn’t notice this. Thus, this first example of the constitution of the Atlantean Empire is rounded out in the sense that I gave it.”

The king threw the swordsman a look that gave no clue how it should be interpreted.

“You’re bringing up instructive examples, Baldur!” he said slowly.

“For now, only to clarify the concept of freedom of mind,” Herr Wieborg replied calmly. “For the clarification of youthful judgment, perhaps a transfer to Gondwana would be needed. After returning, the examples tend to be less instructive.”

“I’ve had enough of your examples,” the high lord growled. “It could get very awkward if I asked further.” With that, he pushed his beautiful granddaughter roughly aside and gave the helmet a kick, sending it flying across the gravel square in front of the royal hall. This happened so quickly and unexpectedly that Baldur, who had just been preparing his next example, stared

almost in disbelief at the children's ball, which now rolled slowly across the closely-cropped lawn and finally came to rest in the gutter by the path.

The king also looked at the ball. Then he looked at his granddaughter, who stood blushing before her grandfather and, through her demeanor, betrayed some sort of guilt.

"How did the ball get under the helmet, Armane?" the duchess asked sternly.

The king made an imperious gesture, silencing his daughter-in-law.

"Do you like playing ball, Baldur?" he asked mockingly.

"Yes, very much," the captain admitted, unconcerned, and would have liked to laugh out loud, since his young friend Armane wore an utterly miserable expression.

"So you're still a real child at heart?" the old lord continued.

"Yes," the knight replied quickly. "Hopefully I'll stay that way for many more years."

"Take the ball and play with my granddaughter," Warager Torgaard commanded curtly. "I'll watch and see how my child-at-heart of a sword-bearer plays ball."

The young people didn't need to be told twice. With a powerful swing, Baldur's sword went after the helmet, and then the ball game began, with Armane given an advantage: she could throw twice, and Baldur once. This was quite amusing, since each was allowed to stop the other's ball after it was thrown, and it became a race each time to see who could get it first.

The king sat back down on his folding chair and bickered with his daughter-in-law, who disapproved of the game. Much to Armane's regret, the fun didn't last long, because a chamberlain from the royal household came from the Allvater fief and announced to Warager the arrival of Duke Wittmund Acora and the Venerable Father of Urd, Amenor Lochi.

"Baldur!" called the king.

The sword-knight broke off the game and went to his lord.

"I actually wanted to keep you here," the old man said. "But now I won't. That example with the sewing school in Urd was too risky. You could stir up quite a fuss if Lochi overheard. You should also beware of telling the king

such examples. I thought you were in cahoots with Acora; that's common among the young men of Asgard. It pays, especially if the old man dies. You won't have it easy, Baldur. Freedom of mind—a thorny gift of nature. Learn to keep your beak shut. Eyes open, child at heart, and mouth shut. I don't really need to say it. — Do you have a wish?"

"No, Your Majesty," replied Baldur.

"I can do a lot for you."

"I can't think of anything for myself right now," the captain said regretfully.

"Unsuited for court service," the king smiled. "You probably imagine you're a king yourself, because you have no wishes?"

"I'm a farmer's son from Thule," Baldur replied. "They're all kings, even if not as great as the one from Asgard."

The lord of Torgaard liked to be provoked, but this time he couldn't manage it. The example of the leather goods dealer and the imperial accounts office had pleased him too much.

"Fetch your sword and helmet, Baldur, and be off with you," he broke off the conversation. "I might call you again sometime. It's quite entertaining to chat with a fledgling."

The sword-bearer kissed the ladies' hands; Armane, in doing so, gave him a gentle tap under the nose with the back of her hand, which again was not the mark of perfect manners.

While the captain of Asgard walked cheerfully toward his trapdoor, the expected guests emerged from the Allvater fief: Duke Wittmund Torgaard and the Papa of Urd.

Edmund Kiß

The First Blow

At the time of the Atlantean Empire, the earth knew nothing of tides or ebb and flow—or only to such a small degree that they were noticed only occasionally by the scientific research groups working in all parts of the realm. Only the minimal tides caused by the gravity of the sun had an effect on the earth's masses, above all on the waters of the world's oceans. There were no lunar tides, because the later moon of the earth was still moving as an independent wandering star around the central sun, and only when it approached the nodes of its orbit could it come dangerously close to the earth. This happened several times every century, and whenever it did, the sea city of Atlantis experienced a peculiar, inexplicable high tide. The waters of the Atlantic ocean would rise many feet high in the streets of the city; the harbor facilities would completely disappear, and the famous canals would back up their waters deep into the fertile plain of Idafeld. Usually, in connection with these floods, there would also be minor or major eruptions of the island volcanoes, and the priests all over the world—whatever faith or superstition they professed—used the convenient opportunity to remind the frightened population of the inferiority of the human soul, with the outwardly visible result of full temple coffers.

Whenever humanity groaned under any kind of plague, the wheat of the priesthood—of every variety and persuasion—always flourished, and the atonement for averting the plague, depending on the development of the affected people, took the form of sacrifices of money, valuables, the blood of animals and humans; in the ever-renewed collapse of the free spirit into spiritual bondage, in the increase of power and influence of the priesthood, in the fostering of ignorance and superstition, the creation of new idols whose primary trait was the capacity for constant offense, and whose malevolent character could only be somewhat appeased through the benevolent mediation of the priesthood.

Poverty and folly, ignorance and distress have always been the sources of priestly power and ostentation, and every sigh from an anguished human breast added yet another gemstone to the crowns of high and mighty temple lords; every tear from a suffering mother quickly and effortlessly turned into a pearl, which adorned the belts of dead idol statues, and every prayer for deliverance from direst physical or deepest spiritual distress drifted as a cloud of incense contentedly around marble altars.

It was about a year after that conversation between Baldur Wieborg and the Reich King Warager Torgaard in the garden of the Allvater's estate in Asgard, when such a flood occurred. The High Chamberlain Odil Ase Gadirus, in his capacity as director of the solar observatory in Agni, had promptly gathered all the warnings from the observatories across the realm and relayed

them to the king. Thus, the relatively minor disaster was not entirely unexpected in its effects. People in Atlantis knew very well that after another four years, the flooding would take on much more severe forms and that the countermeasures against it would have to be carried out with the full force of state leadership—at the very least, to save human lives. In Atlantis, there was less concern for the loss of material goods. Whatever was destroyed would be rebuilt.

The Venerable Father of Urd, Amenor Lochi, was already rebuilding in advance, doing so with the inherited clear conscience of all priests—an attitude for which intermediaries of otherworldly favor might well be envied. He listened to the hours-long financial report of his permanent associate and treasurer, Pheras, whose cradle had stood on the banks of the Nile and who had brought from the land of the brown Fellahin a considerable skill for the voluntary plundering of his fellow men. He, too, possessed a clear conscience. After all, he did nothing for himself, for he was as poor as his exalted lord Amenor Lochi, despite the golden sandals and the flowing silk robe that covered his brownish skin.

After the takings of the past few days, the outlook for further profit for the High Sun Gate was considered very favorable. Reports from the border regions with their anxiety-stricken pious donations had yet to arrive—and there, the land laws of Atlantis did not apply, laws that had so far withstood the ambitions of the high priesthood in the islands of the motherland. Any expansion of land ownership on the islands of the mother realm—say, through donations—was ruled out by the valid and binding laws of the empire, even for the High Sun Gate, at least as long as the reigning Reich King Warager Ase Torgaard lived.

That things might be different under the rule of Acora Wittmund Torgaard was within the realm of possibility, since the heir to the throne seemed not averse to later passing an exceptional law in favor of the High Sun Gate, and some of the reigning state kings also showed signs of softening. After the ceremonial worship service in the vast, open halls of the Sun Sanctuary at Urd, the Venerable Father was a bit fatigued, as the golden sun disk he had had to carry during the solemn petition procession was not exactly light. Although the silk canopy had shielded him from the harsh rays of the real sun, the smell of the sweating bearers still lingered in the nose of the high priest—bearers who, despite doing the hardest work during the entire ceremony, received the least reward. For their strenuous labor, they received only the assurance that the priestly magic spell, delivered at close range, was at its most powerful; and at the great collection that followed the atonement ceremonies, they had to reach particularly deep into their pockets under the close supervision of the Venerable Father.

Temple taxes, which the law of Asgard granted to the High Gate, were all well and good, but their yield was meager compared to the frequent

collections for special occasions, and today's collection was described as "satisfactory" by the treasurer Pheras, who was never satisfied.

The Venerable Father stepped with a sigh to the window of his private chamber, where the most important matters were discussed with his associate, and looked out from the mountain heights, where his high-priestly palace stood beside the gigantic buildings of the Sun Sanctuary, over the vast, flooded plain of the Ida field. It was a strange sight that the old world-city Atlantis presented. Since the canals had overflowed their banks, the small patrol boats of the security office now crossed back and forth on the city streets, and it seemed as though the thousands upon thousands of houses were floating on the sea. From the gardens and parks, the trees stood out like floating green balls, and the bridges crowned with roofs and towers across the canals looked like gigantic stone galleys lying motionless at anchor in the wide expanse of water.

Far out, just below the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, the surface teemed with vessels of all kinds; there was a glitter of snow-white sails and bronze-rimmed warships. The entire fleet for trade and trade protection had put to sea and was waiting for the waters to recede. Fortunately, the weather seemed likely to remain good, and even the volcanoes in the island's highlands limited themselves to multiplying their usual emissions of smoke, without more serious lava flows. And since higher flood waves failed to materialize this time, several ships were already approaching the city with confidence; fast-rowing galleys shot to and fro like slender streaks, and the hammering of the ship captains rang out, with a nearly muffled echo, all the way up to Urd.

"The visit to the Sun Sanctuary could have gone better," the treasurer concluded his report. "Unfortunately, many of the city's residents remained in their homes against our warnings and placed their trust in the boat fleet that the director of the Imperial War Office sent into the streets as reinforcement for the city's security boats. Might it be that the High Sun Gate has found a troublesome opponent in Mr. Kopping?"

"Wieborg must go," replied the Venerable Father.

"He's next in line anyway," confirmed Pheras with an affirming nod of his dark head. "One could entrust him with a greater army. The man is ambitious, and if we play to that trait, we can guide him in directions that suit us."

"One could do much," smiled the Papas of Urd. "But it would have little real effect. Even a transfer to a border province, even if it were that of Gondwana, would do no good. On the contrary, I am of the opinion that the young man must remain here—under my eyes. I have a sense that otherwise he will cause us trouble. Don't worry that I overestimate him, but my intuition rarely fails me. When I said earlier that he must go, it only means he cannot

remain in the Imperial War Office. There, he is stirring up the old Kopping against me."

"I've taken care of the matter with the army supplier Morjang Trulbe," the associate interjected.

"Do you think so?" asked the Venerable Father, turning his fine, intelligent head toward his assistant with a faint smile.

"I had the supplier compensated through the citizens' treasury, using the shipping magnate Queeling Ase Friedger as an intermediary, just as you discussed with me," explained the High Gate's treasurer. "This double route obscures the origin of the compensation sum with such certainty that the Imperial Office cannot see through it. As long as Trulbe does not bring a lawsuit against the Reich—and now there's no longer any reason for him to do so—the old burgrave can be satisfied. And he will be. I know him; he has no desire to stir up dust unless it's absolutely necessary."

"We'll wait and see," replied the Papas of Urd calmly. "I've spoken with the duke. Acora didn't want to, but I know that this man won't say no for long. Ever since he signed the ambassadorial agreement with me, he's lacked any will of his own. He may often regret it, but I can't and won't help him with that."

"I don't understand you, Venerable One," replied Pheras hesitantly. He was familiar with the High Sun Gate's agreement with the heir to the throne, but he didn't know what that had to do with Wieborg.

"Acora is supposed to propose Wieborg as chamberlain to the High King," explained Amenor Lochi. "At least I am quite certain he will do so. He's still resisting, not least because of Frau Armane, the king's maiden. But it won't be long. We have a thin, strong cord around his neck, whose effect he hasn't even realized yet."

"And the king?" asked the treasurer doubtfully.

"He seems to love Wieborg, in his own way," added the Lord of the High Sun Gate.

"Young men like Wieborg tend to plan for the future," Pheras pointed out. "I find it hard to imagine that the captain would risk that future. One day he'll have to reckon with Acora. The old man won't sit in the Allvater fief forever. The pleasure won't last long, then. At least I don't know of any chamberlain of Warager who wasn't so sick of the job in the Asgard within half a year that he became ill. It isn't for everyone to be used as a sandal polisher. When I think of young Wieborg, it seems downright impossible to put such a

headstrong greenhorn as chamberlain next to the irritable Warager. In my opinion, there won't even need to be a sick note; the young man will fly out faster than he moved into the Allvater fief."

"Armane," said the Papas pointedly.

"Now I understand," said the treasurer, satisfied, rolling up the leather strips with his accounts. "At least, I think I understand. Acora wants to separate the young people. If Wieborg moves into the Allvater fief, there'll be trouble. The High King is a secondary matter. Very well. The duke doesn't like Wieborg, the duchess is mistrustful, the old Kopping will also curse the day he brought the young man into his War Office, and if Armane makes things impossible for him, the old man will have to let him go."

"Something like that," said the High Priest of Urd with feigned boredom. "Still, I have the impression that the War Office won't let the matter of the weapons tunics delivered by Morjang Trulbe rest."

"I've taken precautions for that as well," replied the treasurer with a hint of a grin. "Trulbe will disappear to Sumeria in a few weeks. It will cost a lot of money, but the Sun Temple in Chadda will help him out if things go badly for him. There is, in any case, another route, which is also prepared and which I don't need to mention to you, to deal with any further difficulties that might arise. Even this Morjang Trulbe, by his life or his death, can serve to increase the power of the High Sun Gate—and you know, Venerable Father, that all other concerns must be subordinated to this principle."

The High Priest of Urd did not reply, but gazed thoughtfully over the blooming splendor of the terraced gardens of his palace, following with his eyes the tumbling flight of two purple butterflies whose hand-sized wings were edged with a golden border, as if crafted by an artist's hand to delight the spiritual leader of the Atlantean world. Then, with a satisfied smile, Amenor Lochi watched the faithful depart into the flooded city. His prophecy that the "Supernaturals" would soon relent in their anger had strengthened the people's trust. The broad ceremonial avenue, winding down from the Sun Sanctuary of Urd to the Idafield, was dark with the press of crowds. Wagons and litters stood out above the throng of pedestrians, and with deep satisfaction, the Venerable Father noted that the wealthy merchant class was represented just as strongly as the officials and sword-nobility of Asgard. The great number of sedan chairs told him that, above all, the women of the upper classes were making their way, reassured, back to their homes.

Thousands of galleys and boats waited at the edge of the flooded valley for their owners, to carry them through the waterlogged streets back to their houses. The tiny craft shoved off in fleets from the dry shore, and in short order

the dark water teemed with slender streaks fanning out in all directions, each seeking the shortest waterway for the journey home.

The treasurer Pheras waited patiently to see if his master had further instructions. Since time generally played a subordinate role for the high temple officials, the Egyptian stretched his slender limbs comfortably among the silk cushions of the gold-plated armchair and watched, with squinting eyes, the man who could distribute grace and wrath of the gods over the Atlantean people at his own discretion. The treasurer's mental attitude was truly puzzling, but in this he differed little from his high superior or his priestly colleagues of higher or lower rank. The knowledge, the full awareness of the deception was certainly present—even if the deception could be labeled "pious." That the many gods and goddesses, who over the millennia had acquired right of residence on the Atlantean islands, had in that time evolved from simple symbols of nature into the over- and underworld embarrassments they now were, often with rather questionable human characteristics, was fully known to him. He and his colleagues suffered from no illusions whatsoever.

Yet he had a conscience that could be described as "excellent" without in any way doing him an injustice. He, like all priests—including the Papas of Urd, the high lord Amenor Lochi—felt themselves somehow entrusted by the deity. Indeed, during their official duties, which were artistically and undoubtedly beautiful and exalted, they had the unshakeable conviction that they were not mere actors, but high servants of supernatural powers; and the soul-compelling power of the deep impression made by an innumerable, kneeling throng filled them with a kind of certainty of the divine mission of their office. The spiritual exaltation of mysterious rites was so firmly anchored even among the temple lords that they rarely took off their usual masks, even when among themselves; nor did they lose the elevated tenor of their thoughts and, above all, of their words. With a crystal-clear conscience, even in private deliberations about religious ceremonies, they would elevate falsehood to a pious custom, a practice never entirely neglected.

Attempts by dissenting, thoughtful people to break into this peculiar spiritual direction with arguments of reason met with unanimous and indignant rejection—almost instantly escalating to obsession if there was any danger that a single stone might be chipped from the elaborate structure of religious rules. An attack on the spiritual foundations of the accepted faith would be met with brutal hatred and ruthless persecution.

The High Priest of Urd left the open, agate-framed window of his chamber. The midday nap awaited him, and the adjutant Pheras also looked as if his body longed for the low, soft resting bed, whose Japanese silk wrapped itself so gently around the limbs as a good conscience does around a satisfied soul.

"I thank you, Pheras," said the Venerable Father with the kindly, deep voice that rarely failed to move human hearts and which, out of old habit, he used even with close confidants.

The treasurer had already risen.

"If it pleases you, Venerable One, let us store the documents of the account in the treasury vault before I go," he said reverently.

With that, he drew aside a curtain of Indian silk embroidered with deep-black, gleaming pearls, while at the same time rolling the high priest of Atlantis's resting bed—a piece that stood before this silk drapery against the wall—a short way to the side. At the same level as the alabaster wall, a gilded, narrow door appeared.

The Papas of Urd took a key from beneath the jeweled emblem of his ceremonial attire and approached the door with slow steps, the treasurer following his master with the same measured dignity, as if the eyes of an entire congregation were upon them.

But at the very moment when the Lord of the High Sun Gate was about to turn the key, his venerable composure deserted him; the blood drained from his rosy, ivory-toned face, and his yellow, ring-adorned hand began to tremble.

Pheras immediately realized that something was amiss and stared in horror at the changed face of his master turned toward him.

"What has happened?" he whispered anxiously.

"The door is unlocked," replied the highest priest of the realm in a faltering voice.

"The key sometimes turns with difficulty," the treasurer offered, trying to kindle a hope he himself found unlikely. Hesitantly, the two clergymen stood before the crimson splendor of the metal panel, whose hammered repoussé work and delicate flourishes testified to the refined artistic taste of Atlantean craftsmanship. Ashen fear was set in their dark, smooth features. Both knew: behind the metal portal an unpleasant surprise awaited, meant for them alone. A natural desire dawned in both men to summon some armed members of the Abyssinian palace guard. On the polished rosewood table stood a golden sounding basin with dainty agate spheres. One would only need to lift and drop one of the spheres, and the gigantic black men—who had brought from their African homeland all the qualities of dull-witted obedience—would appear, ready to take the place of their masters' lack of courage.

But they both knew very well that such help must not be called under any circumstances until the reason why the door to the treasury vault was unlocked had been discovered. The thought of the black helpers thus arose only as an unattainable wish for a fleeting moment in their minds.

"Step back, Venerable Father," Pheras requested, with the self-assurance of a subordinate who is obliged to ward off any danger from the inviolable head of the Lord of the Gate. Both men drew short, thin daggers from their flowing, embroidered robes, the three-edged blades protruding menacingly from their clenched fists. For a moment, the treasurer held his breath, listening. It was deathly still behind the golden door. The Papas of Urd retreated a few steps like a poised predator and positioned himself at the head of his resting couch. That the treasurer should take the lead in this case was self-evident to both, since the awareness of his superior rank was intimately bound to the necessity of avoiding any avoidable danger. To the credit of the high lord, it must be said that it was not a feeling of cowardice that had driven the blood from his face, but the certain knowledge of an impending calamity—unknown in nature and effect—awaiting him behind the door of the treasury vault.

Pheras wrapped his hand around the chased handle of the watchful, precious door. Then he flung it open; the whole structure of the heavy metal swung, striking with a dull thud against the rubber buffer in the marble floor.

The tension of the two clergymen eased a little. The stairway to the vault yawned darkly and lost itself in impenetrable blackness.

The Venerable Father stepped forward and examined the workings of the lock on the now open door. The spring mechanism was a bit jammed, but the mechanism was still not too difficult to turn. When this inspection was finished, a tiny trace of yellow wax clung to the key.

The men looked at each other. They knew without words that the break-in to the vault had been prepared in advance. Someone had made a duplicate key using a wax impression, however imperfect.

But who knew the location of the vault?

The private room of the Venerable Father was only ever entered by himself, the treasurer Pheras, and an African servant, and the latter never touched the door he knew, because every mortal who dared to open it was inevitably blinded—except, of course, for the Venerable Father, to whom such a thing could not happen due to his intimacy with the Supernal Ones.

Silently, the treasurer Pheras took one of the long wax candles that were stored in a niche carved into the doorframe, struck its blue-green tip

against a striking surface below the niche, and lit his way down the stairs with the suddenly flaring, brightly burning torch.

The Venerable Lord Amenor Lochi quickly counted the number of candles.

"Two are missing," he said quietly.

The clerical adjutant Pheras only nodded, as if to say he had noticed that immediately, and proceeded down the steep lava steps, step by cautious step, with the oppressive weight of the overhanging stone vault above his head, following the abrupt, jagged descent. Like a thousand glowing eyes, the faintly sparkling tiny pebble crystals in the ceiling plates stood out from the black lava stone whenever struck by the candle's light. The shadow of the bearer wavered hesitantly into the black depths. At a short distance, the Lord of the High Sun Gate followed slowly.

Tense, uncontrollable expectation churned in the minds of the two men. They knew that the golden door in the Papas of Urd's resting room was still comparatively easy to open, but that the massive brass gate below in the treasury cellar, with its triple master lock and its gigantic bronze hinges, would not be so easy to overcome. It was also possible that, down below before the mighty lock, there might be a dead man, victim to the snapping, poisoned barb of the second lock, which could suddenly strike the hand of anyone unfamiliar with the friendly safeguards of the High Sun Gate's treasury, should he have tried his luck with a duplicate key.

But even this hope was in vain.

The brass gate was open, and in fact it hung askew and leaning forward on the lowest of its tremendously thick, fire-hardened hinges. The other two were completely destroyed, melted down to a hundred lumps and clumps, so that bronze droplets covered the stone floor far and wide. And the granite doorframe, into which the hinges were deeply set, showed large breaks—indeed, the middle section had been completely blasted out. The glass-hard lava stone had not withstood the stresses of a mysterious heat development and had splintered into shell-like fragments.

A dull, scorching odor smoldered beneath the dark plates of the heavy ceiling, as if there had recently been some smoke development whose gases had not yet had a chance to escape upward through the narrow vent slots in the large square walls and out into the open air of the high priest's terraced gardens.

Again, the men looked at each other. Deep concern lay in these silent glances. Clearly, both understood what had happened and had also instantly

realized by what means the heavy brass door had been opened, bypassing all master locks and poisoned barbs.

"Blast-fire from the stores of the Imperial War Office," said the treasurer Pheras after a while, his voice almost toneless, but trembling with suppressed anger.

"I knew it the moment that scorching smell hit my nose," replied Amenor Lochi with forced calm.

"Only the War Office has access to this terrible weapon of war, which burns through walls and towers and makes great galleys flare up like tinder. Old Kopping manages the stockpile. As far as I know, his current assistant holds the keys and is responsible. So only Kopping has the fire. Him and us."

"It could have been stolen from us as well," Pheras remarked thoughtfully. "But your depots containing the stores of blast-fire are on the southern island of Maru, in the territory of the provincial king Femern Ase Gromburg. That could be clarified in a few weeks. If you agree, Venerable Father, I'll travel there myself tonight in a temple administration speedboat and check the stocks."

The High Priest shook his head.

"I don't believe that," he replied firmly. "The explosive comes from the war depot of Asgard. I'm afraid you can spare yourself the trip to Maru, dear Pheras."

"The detonation took place this morning, just before sunrise," the adjutant Pheras stated a bit louder.

"When the entire priesthood and the congregation were assembled in the sanctuary for the atonement ceremony," added the Venerable Father.

"And the guards from Abyssinia?" asked the treasurer, his angry voice clearly betraying how severe the punishment would be for the negligent security men—unless, of course, it would be wiser to remain silent about this terrible affair, for now.

"Go on!" commanded Amenor Lochi harshly, and he squeezed through the gap of the crooked brass gate into the treasury vault, disregarding all former caution and concern for his sacred person. But nothing unfortunate happened. In the vault, besides the clerics, there was not a soul. The cash chests stood untouched, as did the trunks of gemstones and gold bars that waited here to be loaned out at high interest to the frontier provinces, to shipping magnates and merchants, to foreign princes and trading houses.

But there was no sigh of relief to show that the Venerable Father was reassured by this. The money and valuables stored in the vault were insignificant compared to what increased his power throughout the wide world, and he would have been grateful to his star if the chests had been looted, if the remnants of the theft had been strewn in wild disorder across the rough stone floor. He would even have embraced his accountant Pheras if these remnants had been carefully collected—and likewise vanished. But since the chests and boxes stood untouched, only one thing was possible: the intruder had not been after money or pearls, but for things whose value—at least to the High Sun Gate—exceeded all the precious metal of the Sun Sanctuary of Urd a hundredfold, making the sapphires of the Posiden Hall in the Allvater's Manor on Asgard seem like worthless pebbles by comparison:

The Documents of Urd.

And already the treasurer’s cry of horror echoed dully between the broad pillars of the cellar.

The door of the brass-armored wall cabinet in the vault had been melted out. Bent and swollen, the heavy brass lock lay on the floor.

About half of the documents of the High Sun Gate—written on the thinnest wild leather—were missing. The intruder had not just randomly snatched up everything that was stored in the cabinet in scrolls and bundles. The two clerics realized at once: Here, a man had made selections—someone accustomed to distinguishing the important from the less important at a glance; someone who had sorted with great, even insultingly calm, deliberation, clearly in the firm conviction that he would not be disturbed. Yes, here a dangerous connoisseur of the human soul had been at work. This person knew exactly that the black-skinned guards would have their eyes and ears filled with superstitious fervor, fixed on the atonement ceremony in the Sun Sanctuary; knew that the penetrating hiss of the liquid blast-fire deep beneath the earth would be regarded with anxious shudder as the voices of angry powers from the depths; had coldly exploited the general excitement over the mysterious, threatening flooding of the city, so puzzling to the common people.

The top compartment of the armored cabinet was completely emptied.

But inside it lay a thin scrap of leather, inconspicuous and almost easy to overlook. Two heads bent now, in the shadow of the guttering candle, over the little scrap.

Only a few characters were written on it, cleanly and clearly, and at the end there was a seal, made from the wax of the candle that the intruder had taken from the supply in the upper door niche. With a faltering voice, the

treasurer Pheras deciphered the few words, since the Venerable Father was too agitated to read:

"Baldur Wieborg of Thule to Amenor Lochi.
In the joyful war of spirits, the first blow."

And then, clearly and distinctly, followed the seal imprint of the Sword-bearer of Asgard.

The Venerable Father felt his throat tighten. Not anger and pain were the reason for this, but rather the realization that there was something special in this reckless—indeed, almost mad—declaration of war from this young fellow, something he had never encountered before in his life. Upright, open, truth-loving enmity, which knew no concealment of its aim. War of spirits! Baldur Wieborg did not intend to wield his blade of spirit merely against the excesses of temple worship; Amenor Lochi would have welcomed such attacks. If need be, in the event of occasional defeat, one could always counter the opponent by amending existing abuses.

No, there it was. War of spirits! And the Venerable Father of Urd was shrewd enough to understand what this meant if the robber of his documents was protected against poison and dagger. This Wieborg had realized how the fight had to be fought. He had understood that, without the bulletproof armor which he now held in the form of the documents of Urd, the struggle could not be carried on; he now knew how strong the opponent was, and where his allies sat in the populations of the federated states and in the administrative offices of Asgard.

It was self-evident for such a thoroughly organized and cleverly led administration as that of the High Sun Gate that no documents existed regarding matters in direct conflict with the prevailing state and imperial laws. And it was equally self-evident that Baldur Wieborg had not for a moment expected the existence of such documents.

Nevertheless, among the stolen writings were parchments containing binding assurances from rulers of foreign states that were at war with the Empire. The High Gate was accustomed to anticipating the expected victory of the Aesir armies by securing rights from foreign rulers that pertained to the active promotion of the Atlantean cult—specifically, for the event of the defeat of the respective prince. That, in such a case, the spiritual influence of the High Sun Gate was to be exercised in favor of the foreign princely family and its property, went without saying. The fact of the Gate's activities extending beyond the borders of the Empire was known on Asgard, and had often been the subject of heated discussion within the imperial offices and the king's council. Indeed, throughout Atlantean history, this intermediary activity had been deliberately used repeatedly in full awareness of the risks, in order to avoid seemingly

greater harm. But the imperial government had always had to pay for such concessions by granting some special rights to the High Sun Gate, and the unpleasant phrase "a state within a state" often cropped up in confidential discussions in the halls of the imperial offices.

Most unpleasant of all, however, was the fact that Baldur Wieborg had found and taken the agreement with the Crown Prince of the Empire, Wittmund Torgaard. In that ambassadorial treaty, the captain now held not only a weapon against the Venerable Father, but also against the Acora of the Empire. Now, others would have reason to tremble; not the Papas alone!

In the shadow of the dwindling wax torch, the Papas of Urd managed to inspect the writing and seal of the Sword-bearer of Asgard himself. There was no doubt about the authenticity of the seal mark—the rising sun-year-god of the winter solstice to spring, the tiny symbol-figure with upraised arms.

The Venerable Father handed the thin piece of leather to his treasurer.

“Take the rest of the documents with you, Pheras,” he said grimly. “For now, I will store them in the silver chest in the small council chamber. That room is rarely used, and—Wieborg has no interest in stealing the remainder.”

And while the adjutant Pheras silently followed the order, Amenor Lochi turned away and slowly climbed the stairs of the vault, discarding with each step a plan for how he might succeed in neutralizing the reckless young man from the Northlands.

The Lord of the High Sun Gate was by no means desperate. The crushing impact of the discovery had been overcome. A vague hope arose in him that the young man might dutifully hand the documents over to the High King. These Aesir, after all, suffered from obsessive ideas about duty and honor. Let old Warager read the documents! Let him cause trouble for the Gate; at worst, a complaint before the Supreme Court of the Empire regarding the agreement with the Duke might be the result. There were countermeasures for such things. If the Acora was spared, then proceedings against the Gate would also have to be dropped. It would be worse if the captain kept silent and simply waited for his moment.

The Papas of Urd entered his rest chamber, which he suddenly hated as if it were a recalcitrant adversary. A glance in the polished glass mirror, which, reaching from floor to ceiling, was set into a wall, showed the high lord the need to smooth out his face, which now bore the deep lines of worry and resentment.

Amenor Lochi grew angry at himself. His hand twitched toward the bronze lamp on his care table, as if to throw it at the unrelenting mirror—but of

course, he did not allow himself to succumb to such childish lack of self-control; it was only the wish, trembling in his tormented nerves.

Again, the Lord of the Sun Gate stepped to the agate window. This time, however, his gaze found no pleasure in the splendor of his terrace gardens, nor in the still-ongoing procession of the faithful into the depths of the Ida field. His dark eyes searched for Warga Gadirus, his beautiful gardener. He regretted having allowed her to attend the ceremonies at the Sun Sanctuary. The captain must have come through the garden—probably openly and brazenly, as was his shameless manner. Had the gardener been walking back, it would not have been possible for the man to enter the Papas's rest chamber like a common burglar.

Amenor Lochi lowered his gaze. Indeed, down there in the bed between blooming blue roses—the treasures of his palace garden—were the bold, indelible traces of a ladder. And not just a single ladder. The deep holes left by several ladders, pressed into the soft earth, could be seen all along the garden side of the palace. Clearly, many people had climbed onto the flat roof of the high priest's palace, presumably to watch, at least from a distance, the atonement ceremonies in the solar observatory.

Amenor Lochi let out a bitter laugh. He had fostered fear and fanatical obsession to a high degree! Here was the tangible result. Palace guards, women, and gardeners had all forgotten their duty and, in dull, reverent fear, focused all their senses solely on the golden portal of the Sun Gate, which radiantly greeted them from afar. How easy this thrice-cursed Wieborg had found it to carry out his villainous plan—confidently, with the incendiary compound to which, as an official of the War Office, he had such easy access—melting down the doors that would not yield to a copied key! He had been able to spend several hours of the splendid Atlantic spring morning carefully selecting among the documents of Urd, and there could be no doubt that he had taken everything not meant for foreign eyes.

A heavy door slammed shut behind the Papas in the palace. Amenor Lochi involuntarily flinched and quickly turned around.

"Oh, it's you, Pheras," he said with a sigh.

Silently, the treasurer, carrying the rest of the documents in his arms, left his master's rest chamber, only to return a little while later with quiet footsteps.

"Your Abyssinian servant renewed the water in your bath a few hours ago," the treasurer reported. "I just spoke to the man. He was surprised that the wash water was so dirty. This Wieborg even had the nerve to thoroughly clean himself in your bathhouse before leaving the palace."

Amenor Lochi made an impatient gesture and refrained from answering. All that was missing now was for the Asgard captain to have eaten his breakfast here as well!

"The Duke Wittmund Acora and Warga Gadirus are standing in the columned courtyard," the treasurer continued, with forced composure, since he also saw them with his master.

"They are both safe," said Amenor Lochi thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," replied Pheras just as cautiously.

"Warga is a recognized Aesir woman," the Papas continued, sensing a note of mistrust in his adjutant's voice.

"But a relative of Wieborg," Pheras pointed out.

"Her mother told me about the serious illness Wieborg caused the girl when the Kazike Paczi Manca from Cuzco visited the horticultural school," explained the Lord of the Gate. "Would I have brought the Gadirus to Urd otherwise? Even the High Chamberlain Odil considers his sister absolutely trustworthy. She is fanatical and devout. I know that type of woman. — Have you ever watched how she kisses my signet ring?"

A smile appeared on the intelligent, distinguished face of the Papas of Urd, thoughtful and kind, and the adjutant, who saw this smile reflected in the agate, almost imperceptibly shook his head. If that was the case, he realized now he should not say more.

But Gadirus had to disappear. Perhaps become ill. Death was not necessary, but she had to be removed from the Venerable Father's sight— somehow. Priests, after all, knew the means for this. What could be read in the smiling features of his master was not pleasant. So it was not advisable to voice his suspicion regarding Warga Gadirus; instead, he must act.

Something like a contemptuous grin tried to creep over the treasurer's brownish features, but only the first hint of such an expression became visible.

The Venerable Father gazed thoughtfully and silently into the garden for a long time. The workers of Warga Gadirus, who had attended the religious services in the morning and forenoon, now appeared—despite the scorching heat of the sun—to carry out the most necessary tasks that had been left unfinished.

"I do not wish to negotiate further with the Duke today, Pheras," ordered the High Priest of Urd. "If he tries to announce himself, say that I am ill. — In the evening, after the sun has set behind the mountains, I will discuss the

details about the stolen documents with you. I have some thoughts regarding Wieborg that I would like to clarify with you. For the restoration of the doors in the vault, I want foreign craftsmen, not our own and not anyone from the city. Perhaps from Femern or Schoongard. Please see to it."

Pheras bowed to his superior's back. Not very deeply, but enough so that the master could see the movement reflected in the agate windowpanes. In this respect, Amenor Lochi demanded a lot, and it was unwise to show too much familiarity.

The Venerable Father stood in the middle of the rest chamber for a while longer and finally opened the door to the hallway a crack. Outside stood a black servant, who reverently fell to his knees when he noticed the movement of the gold-chased door. Everything remained quiet. Apparently, the Duke had not tried to announce himself. Had the allure of the beautiful gardener distracted him? Had he gone with her—shielded from view by groves and blooming hedges—into the park?

Amenor Lochi closed the door.

The midday rest turned out very poorly. As soon as he closed his eyes, Baldur Wieborg stood before the High Priest of Urd, laughing, but with merciless coldness in his gray eyes.

The future would bring a struggle with this young, unknown man. It would be difficult, because the prospects for the High Sun Gate were no longer particularly favorable. But there was one last consolation if all other means failed.

The gods often let such men as Wieborg die at the right time.

Edmund Kiß

Three Letters

"The Papa of Urd had you poisoned," said Baldur Ase Wieborg darkly, as he stroked the white, blue-veined hand of his confidante, Warga Gadirus.

The young gardener did not take her blue, beautiful eyes off the hard, sharply-cut face of her friend, who sat at her low bed in deep mourning and powerless bitterness. When Warga fell ill, she did not remain in her splendid country house, which the Venerable Father Amenor Lochi had given her in the very first year of her work in the terraced gardens of the Palace of the High Sun Gate; instead, she had herself brought to Atlantis to seek recovery in her parents' home. Her old housekeeper and scullery maid, Burd, had stayed behind in her property in the temple city; even the servants provided by Amenor Lochi had not yet been dismissed. Warga had hoped to quickly overcome the illness, relying on her untapped, resilient youth, but now her recovery was dragging on for a long time. She herself had the vague feeling that some enemy had poisoned her, but she knew for certain that it had not been the Venerable Father himself, nor had he ordered it.

"It wasn't Amenor Lochi," she said quietly. "If I have been poisoned, then it must have happened from another source."

At that, quite suddenly, Baldur Wieborg broke down. His powerful, narrow blond head sank onto the young gardener's hand, and his broad shoulders trembled beneath the coarse leather doublet in a stunned agony.

Baldur had taken up the fight against the High Sun Gate, under the mistaken belief that all hatred and persecution would be directed solely at him. That's why, at the very first blow, he had recklessly raised his visor, so that the opponent could see the open, bold face of the duelist. He was resolved to endure whatever came, as far as it concerned himself. That the first casualty in the war with the Gate—what he himself had called the "joyful war of the spirits"—would be the blond, clever Warga, he had not expected. There could be no joyful spiritual war with the lords of idolatry. Here, other weapons prevailed. For the time being, he had made himself immune to blows, stabs, and poison. The stolen documents from Urd armored him threefold against the deft hands of the Gate, which could so quietly and gently silence every voice that did not please them.

Warga wanted to stroke the blond head of the marine with her right hand—a man for whom she would have gladly given more than just her health, even her life, if necessary. But she let her hand hover and only smiled, with a quiet feeling of happiness in her heart that this proud, unyielding man wept over her hand like a boy with a gentle soul. She knew so well that the heart of this triumphant man held all opposites: depths and heights, tendernesses that only

men know, and hardnesses that form the steely foundation of great characters. No one had told her this, for very few people knew more about Baldur Wieborg than that he, within the ranks of the Imperial Army, had a future like few other sword-bearers in Atlantis. But Warga possessed the mysterious power of sure, deep knowing, which is given to some favored women. She knew who Baldur Wieborg was; perhaps there was only one woman—and perhaps only one person—under the sky of eternal Atlantean spring who truly knew. Baldur Wieborg was an over-thrower of an old era, the spiritual hammer of a favored race, forging the new with his testing, initial hammer-blows—what must and would come. The Asian pure-bloods regarded him with pride as one of the unwavering Sons of the Sun, who upheld the lordly right on Atlantis for the unmixed blood of the Nordic race. How mistaken they were, these proud bloodlines of Asgard! With determined step, this man wanted to leave the narrow circle, consciously wanted to widen the shrinking ring of pure-blooded Nordic lineages, to save the heritage that was alive in many millions who had to stand aside, because their Asian blood no longer flowed in full purity through their veins.

"Baldur!" Warga Gadirus continued, and there was a tenderness in her voice that, like a gentle, soothing current, flowed into the man's heart. "You shouldn't worry about the life of a gardener. Whoever wages a war like we do must reckon with losses. And, Baldur, I'm not dead. You know the doctor my father brought for me. He has spent a lifetime dealing with cases of poisoning, and he'll help me as well. I'm still young. Warga Gadirus won't die so easily. Do you know what the doctor asked when he examined me?"

Baldur Wieborg shook his head, but still did not lift it from Warga's hand.

"He asked if I had—friends in Urd," the young woman said, with special emphasis on the word "friends." And I replied that I probably didn't have such friends as he meant. The Venerable Father is well-disposed toward me, and as the head gardener of the temple and palace gardens, I have no opportunity to acquire the sort of friends he was referring to. I wasn't allowed to say I had a suspicion. To this day, no one knows but you and me that I enabled you to access the resting chamber of the Venerable Father."

Baldur sat up, animated. "Did the doctor believe you?" he asked quickly.

Warga shook her head with a subtle movement. He had remained silent, but she had seen that he was convinced that she had been poisoned by some source within the High Sun Gate. "My father later told me the doctor recognized the poison," the gardener continued. "He's treated many patients, and almost all of them had some connection to the Gate. The poison causes long-lasting paralysis, and it's possible that it's given to people whom, for whatever reason,

they want to be rid of for a while. Well, the Papa of Urd doesn't want to be rid of me. He sends me flowers every day and wrote me a letter yesterday saying he hopes for my swift recovery. He fully expects that I will return to my old sphere of activity. He's determined under no circumstances to fill my position anew, even at the risk that the gardens might suffer. And he's offered me his mountain estate in the Garmalen range, for me and my parents, so that I can remain in their loving care. Should I accept it, Baldur?"

"Under no circumstances!" said the swordsman, appalled.

"Why not?" asked the gardener with a smile. "It's good for our cause if I play the innocent. Besides, I have nothing to fear from Amenor Lochi. He knows nothing and doesn't suspect me of having gotten you the key impression. No one except his deputy Pheras and the Abyssinian servant is allowed to enter his resting chamber. Only Warga Gadirus was permitted. Amenor Lochi even tried to keep it secret from his own treasurer, though he didn't succeed. — Do you now believe that Amenor Lochi isn't responsible for my illness?"

Baldur Wieborg didn't answer. He didn't look at his friend either, and a bitter feeling welled up in him—a sense of shame that he had brought this valuable woman into the orbit of the Venerable Father of Urd. The silence lasted a long time. Baldur wrestled with himself, unsure if he should ask. Then he decided:

"Warga, the Lord of the Gate loves you," he said harshly.

"That's possible, even quite likely," replied the girl with a smile that Baldur could not see, since, full of pain, he was staring at her white hand, absentmindedly and forlornly stroking it. "That alone made it possible to find the hidden entrance to the treasury cellar—because the Papa trusted me. Pheras once looked at me with hostile eyes when I was in the Venerable Father's resting room, renewing the flowers in the agate bowls."

"This matter touches my honor," said Baldur Wieborg, with difficulty.

"Doesn't it touch mine as well?" asked Warga Gadirus.

The captain shook his head vehemently.

"It's the same thing," he replied briefly and curtly, for there was something like a rift within his heart. "My struggle begins with a deep, inner fissure. I don't mean the theft of the documents. That was open war, started for the sake of success."

"How I wage my struggle is my business," Warga declared firmly.

"I'm the one waging this fight, not you."

"Didn't you once say you loved independent minds?" asked the patient with gentle mockery. "Or did you only mean men's minds?"

"Then you've grown, Warga," smiled the captain. "If I recall correctly, weren't you a little hesitant in the district school's garden by the gentle canal? Didn't a young girl want to ask her brother first if she should trust the Ase Wieborg and become his ally? Now you've grown so much that I owe you the very opportunity to fight this battle with a chance of success. That forges a strong bond…"

Warga Gadirus closed her eyes. The swordsman looked worriedly at her pale, delicate face and made a motion as if to leave. The gardener held him back with a pressure of her hand.

"You don't know why I closed my eyes," she said softly. "You see, I was thinking of that hour in the garden that gave me new hope. I was so foolish then, Baldur, and took you for an arrogant Northman. I had become so used to enduring the slightly contemptuous friendliness that was shown to me—as someone merely acknowledged as an Asin in society and dealings, in office, and in the pure-blooded side of my family—that I couldn't understand your faith in a great people of Asiatic spirit. You don't know how happy your answer made me at that time, when you said we could not turn back the history of Nordic blood, and would have to deal with things as they are. That's when I recognized your calling: to forge a single bloc from everything that still remains of Asiatic nobility in blood and soul—and I know there is much. That is why I have devoted myself to you, why I procured for you the documents from Urd, and why I am lying here poisoned—and why I lie here gladly."

"It was the only way to wrest power from the hands of the High Sun Gate," replied Baldur Wieborg earnestly. "Perhaps the Atlantean people will thank you more than they will ever thank me, even if I win my spiritual war. We want to tear souls and hearts away from the Venerable Father of Urd, to prove that under the roof of Asgard there is room for all who belong together in blood and spirit; we want to accept the fateful mixtures of blood as they have become through the guilt of our fathers, and we want, as a unified people, to take account of this new unity. Where we draw the line will be a matter for the future. But one thing is certain: we must succeed, in the motherland of Atlantis, in forging a unified community of perhaps twenty million people, who, as visible signs of our Nordic blood, possess white skin, light eyes, a free spirit, and a disgust for all unworthy bonds of superstition and enslavement of the soul. Priestly rule, with its doctrine of guilt and its atonement through sacrifices of any kind, is a sign of decay. Clarity, enlightenment about the meaning of the divine, is a sign of strength, of spiritual ascent. Honorableness with a view to reward and gain is a dirty trait that shouldn't be called honorable. In the future,

pity for poor people shall be considered an insult; and wherever, in a city of the Reich, a person has no bed, I will punish the local leader for allowing it, for letting this poor man be forced to beg for the charity of his brothers. Wherever, in a member state of the Reich, remedial schools for neglected girls must be established, I will demand the deposition of the king who was incapable of eradicating the root of the neglect. Wherever a priestly school—if it is still able to fill its halls—fails to prepare its youth in such a way that they meet the requirements of the Reich's and higher schools, I will strip the priestly teachers of their office—not arbitrarily, but with proof of their incompetence. Let them change, and if not, let them disappear. — You see, Warga, people always think that a warrior from the North knows nothing but the persuasive power of the sword. It is great, to be sure, and I will use it where its use is necessary. But above all else must stand reason and soul; persuasion, not force; deeds born from new thoughts, not from violence. That is how I want to work, and you should know this and not follow me without understanding. All should know. Here, there are no lingering ambiguities, no detestable obfuscation of the goal, for we have nothing to fear or to hide. — But it will depend on my loyalty whether, one day, a great people remembers the gardener of Urd with gratitude."

With a sigh of relief, Baldur Ase Wieborg paused. For a moment, he feared he had revealed too much of his intentions and far-reaching plans, but then he reminded himself that without trust in the first of his allies—who now lay before him, paralyzed by poison for his cause—his colossal struggle against all the powers of the Empire and the Gate would not be possible.

"Tell me, Captain Wieborg, how old are you?" Warga Gadirus asked quietly.

"Thirty years," the swordsman replied, surprised. "Do I already look so worn out?"

"It's not so bad," smiled the gardener. "I'm just amazed how an odd-jobber in the Imperial Office for War manages to depose kings and call community leaders to account. I know you Nordic peasants think of yourselves as kings, and I'm almost inclined to believe you are—even if the soil of your fields still clings to your shoes. But a worry just occurred to me, Baldur. You are ambitious, you want for yourself…"

"You don't need to say any more, Warga," interrupted the swordsman, cutting off his ally. "Otherwise our friendship might take a serious blow. But I hope you're only trying to lead me out onto Nordic thin ice. In our land of eternal spring, there is no such ice—at least not for me. You know perfectly well that I only want to depose kings and community leaders because someone has to do it, and I hope I will be that man. I know of no other."

"That sounds a bit more modest, Baldur," said Warga Gadirus seriously, though laughter sparkled in her blue eyes. "But do you realize that you'll have to overthrow the Asiatic constitution if you want to become king? Isn't the constitution good? Isn't it admired abroad as something remarkable?"

"So, now I understand your concern," said the captain, reassured. "I have no desire to destroy things that are valuable. So I won't need to tamper with the constitution of the Asen either. The race law, which was once the foundation of the state, has long since been breached by numerous 'recognitions.' You yourself have suffered under this 'recognition,' and I remember that a certain beautiful gardener gave me a rather angry look when I innocently asked if she was a goddess. So, is it a constitutional change if I want to extend recognition to millions, in order to form a unified bloc of distinguished people with Asiatic spirit? Gnawing on granite with your teeth isn't appealing to me either. So why should I overthrow the proven royal constitution? On the contrary, I hope to strengthen it, Warga. Perhaps I might even win the heart of the Acora…"

"You've probably already won over the old master, haven't you?" smiled the patient, trying to turn her paralyzed neck.

Baldur gently took the girl's head in both hands and turned it toward him. In the eagle eyes of the great man, a golden spark glimmered, full of tender compassion, and the gardener had to struggle not to burst into tears.

"The old master?" repeated Baldur Wieborg. "I believe so, yes. The wondrous heart of the king of the Reich seems to have been beguiled. — I've brought you a letter I received from him the day before yesterday. — Should I read it aloud, or is that enough for today?"

"No, no!" pleaded Warga Gadirus. "Read it to me."

The captain pulled a fine piece of leather from the breast pocket of his tunic and unfolded it on the edge of the bed.

"Warager Torgaard to Wieborg," the young warrior read aloud. "The duke wants to speak with you. Has asked me to send you to Castle Aargund on the island of Acora, where he is with the duchess and the royal child Armane. I agree. Have sent permission to Aargund. You may go. It's time I put you on ice in Zimbabwe, take the horns off you. Will think about it. Old Ase Kopping has had enough of you, too. Has proposed you as group leader for Schoongard, where a firm hand is needed. I've declined. Won't promote a greenhorn as quickly as Kopping thinks. Told him he still needs to eat what he's cooked for a while. He and the duke then wanted to reward me by making you chamberlain. Thanks, but

no thanks. I've got enough trouble without you. Just what I needed—to be saddled with a ball-playing child's head. Written report about stolen documents is outrageous. But satisfied with you for deliberately avoiding the chain of command through Kopping. Your request for punishment, for reasons of state prudence, is temporarily denied. Expect the return of the documents to Lochi. Report on what happened. Thanks for the certified copies. Nice business with the Gate. Very unpleasant for my house. Baldur ripe for the gallows if this keeps up. Kopping should deduct the cost for the stolen explosive fire from your salary. Unfortunately can't do it, because he mustn't know about it. I'm very cross with you, you good-for-nothing. Report back how Lochi looks when he gets the documents back. I don't know any swordsman as cheeky as you. You still have one wish left. Or are you still without wishes? Will try to make you harmless. Maybe a civilian job? After your return from Aargund I expect a report.

Warager, King of the Reich."

"You really wrapped him around your finger!" laughed Warga in genuine amazement. "And what about the documents?"

"I wanted to return them to the Venerable Father personally," reported the captain calmly. "But he didn't receive me, so I handed the documents over to the treasurer, Pheras—naturally, in exchange for a receipt, which he signed through gritted teeth. The King of the Reich already had his written report on Asgard by the next morning. I don't need the documents anymore. Certified copies are in safe hands. I don't know if you're aware that your father also received a set? As a professor of state law, it concerns him directly."

"Did you also make a request?" asked the gardener.

"Yes, since His Majesty brought it up and also said a civilian profession would be desirable for me," laughed the captain exuberantly. "I asked for permission to teach in the colonnades of the College for General Spiritual Sciences."

"And the answer?" Warga asked eagerly.

"Still pending," replied Baldur. "Presumably, I'll have to wait until I return from Aargund. The king is probably still chewing on that morsel—he certainly didn't expect me to take him at his word about a civilian job. And he probably suspects nothing good from my request. But he'll have no choice but to grant permission. The king's word carries weight among the Asen. Most likely, the old man is now seriously angry with me, and I'll find out when I return, when I present my report."

"Baldur, Baldur!" sighed the gardener.

"Yes, dear, poor gardener," smiled the swordsman. "Now, not even the chief prosecutor of the Reich would dare bring the little office worker in the War Office to account for breaking and entering and theft in the palace of the High Sun Gate. Too many high-ranking figures could get caught up in the maelstrom by the young captain. There must be something rotten if pests like me can go unpunished. Let's hope the day comes when such things are no longer possible."

The door to Warga's sickroom opened quietly. Frau Gadirus appeared on the threshold.

"That's enough, Baldur," she said softly. "My child needs to rest now. You can come again another time."

Obediently, the swordsman stood up and offered his ally his hand.

"When do you leave for Aargund?" the gardener asked.

"Tomorrow evening, with the mail galley Wiking 3 of the Imperial Postal Office, so—very ordinary and simple," replied her friend.

"Stay well," said Warga softly.

"And you—get well," the swordsman replied warmly.

Outside, her mother led him into the study of the professor of state law. Weeling Ase Gadirus had not yet returned from the university.

"Do you know who died suddenly?" she asked. "The treasurer and deputy of the Venerable Father in Urd, Herr Pheras. I know the family. I was very sorry to hear it."

Outwardly, Baldur Wieborg remained calm, though he was deeply shaken within. Warga's mother wouldn't have understood him even if she had noticed. Pheras was the second victim of the stolen documents. On this point, Baldur had no doubts. The Venerable Father was quick in his decisions!

"Do they know what illness he died of?" Baldur asked cautiously.

"They say it was a stroke," replied the woman. "No one would have believed it, but Priest Martum Ase Gorwart, whom I often visit in the sanctuary of the Earth Mother, claims to have observed that Pheras had lately been suffering from heart trouble—at least, from shortness of breath. And after all, he was no longer young."

"A little over fifty," said the captain thoughtfully. When Baldur Wieborg left the house of the professor of state law, to return to Asgard with his small galley, he thought that, if it depended solely on Amenor Lochi's wishes, he himself ought to be the next in this fine line. What could the Duke want from him? At the moment, nothing good was to be expected from the heir to the throne of the Reich, for Baldur was certain that Amenor Lochi had not kept silent with Acora. So—something bad?

Not absolutely certain, but rather likely. If only he could manage to speak alone with Herr Wittmund Torgaard for a few hours, everything might yet turn out well.

The small galley, rowed by two sailors from the Imperial War Office—this War Office, as is known, had been merged with the Admiralty—shot through quiet side-canals of the garden city, to avoid being held up by the busy traffic in the main canals of the commercial city of Atlantis. The inhabitants of Atlantis had a fondness for their waterways, a weakness inherited in their blood from their seafaring ancestors. Yet there was no lack of well-paved, broad thoroughfares, and a significant number of solid stone bridges with high-arched spans made the dividing canals nearly disappear. But anyone who had business in the city would take a small galley to the place where they had to disembark—to visit department stores, pay their taxes, or check the locations of sea-going ships posted at the shipping company boards. Only the officials of the municipal administrations, city treasuries and financial offices, customs offices and foreign agencies, and the city and higher schools, usually went on foot to their workplaces.

By contrast, the workers of the shipyards, workshops, and factories, as well as those of the extensive gardening and agricultural enterprises in and outside the city, were transported to their workplaces in large flatboats.

The house of the Ase Weeling Gadirus lay almost at the edge of the sea; from the roof, one could watch the breakers of the Atlantic rolling against white sandy shores and tall stone bulwarks. Because of this, Baldur's small galley had to cross half the giant city to reach Asgard, which rose in the very center of Atlantis. The swordsman sat at the helm, also handling the small ship's bell, which, however, was seldom used in the quiet side canals, as the tiny vessel with its high prow glided on its rushing keel—sometimes under graceful, sometimes under massive bridges, on which idle people stood gazing into the water; over which the bustling traffic of the world city flowed—carriages and litters, pedestrians and riders; their wandering shadows flitting back and forth behind the round columns of attic rooms in constant motion.

The journey through the city to Troy, lying at its center, lasted more than three hours, but Baldur Wieborg did not find the time long. After crossing

the first ring canal, which was eighteen hundred feet wide, he could pay less attention to navigation. The captain's alert thoughts worked ceaselessly; the familiar scene of the vibrant community on the Ida Field could no more distract him than the accustomed sight of the distant, gleaming Asgard rising on the horizon. The working elephants on a construction site by the canal bank did not draw his attention, although a large crowd of adults and children stood around the giant trunked animals, marveling at their immense strength as they hauled building timbers and hewn stone blocks. The mighty pachyderms were a familiar sight in Atlantis, especially in the harbor district, where they pulled sea galleys needing repairs—using ropes over greased wooden beams—up slanting ship ramps, as if the great vessels were light toys.

Only once did the captain look up, when the boat glided past the garden side of the Imperial College for General Spiritual Sciences, that broad lawn set with semicircular colonnades, behind which the administrative buildings of the college rose in marble splendor—broad and massive, adorned among green groves. If the King of the Reich kept his word—and there was little reason to doubt it—then, one day, from these columned halls, world-shaking ideas could radiate out into the Atlantean world, and here, the destiny of a people could turn for better or worse. The swordsman could not take his eyes off the impressive image: the Nordic will for free intellectual development, embodied in marble and bronze amid the world city, and sheltered with shady arcades and groves. Here, a young captain's relentless drive for attack was meant to give new impetus to a world grown rigid. After all, at least in the universities, the old Asiatic principle still held—the same praised by a Greek historian even after millennia: that every good apart from excellence was considered worthless, and that only sober acumen, united with excellence, could create values worthy of being called truly valuable.

Baldur Wieborg smiled. This would make sparks fly! He wanted to speak about the development of the Nordic Sun Service over the many thousands of years of happy Atlantis—a warrior from Asgard talking about religious services. He had found some of the historical evidence and documents in the libraries of the War Office; others, however, the High Sun Gate had, albeit very unwillingly, been forced to place at his disposal. Yes, it would become a fight to the death, to be fought implacably on both sides. And then the attack on the ossified Asiatic race law was to begin. This was especially difficult because the law itself was good, but, due to being broken through thousands of times in individual and multiple cases over the millennia, had lost its beneficial effect. Now, the law protected only a vanishing fraction of the Atlantean population. The law would have to be expanded and then closed—to become a dam against any further decline of the noble heritage. Enemies would be everywhere—behind him as well as before his broad Nordic brow. And all of them he intended to overcome with the crystalline clarity of spiritual weapons. Wieborg hoped for the goodwill of others, as all Baldur-natures must and do. The advantage of a unified national bloc would become evident even to the most

obstinate nobility if the unstoppable shrinking of the small, tenacious Nordic circle of pure-blooded Asen were proven beyond doubt.

The high gables of old warehouses made of dark gray, red, and white stone now slid in front of the splendid view of the college where Wieborg wished to forge a stronger Atlantis. Merchant galleys unloaded their cargoes with creaking cranes into yawning holds; customs cutters shot searchingly out of narrow side canals; clearance documents were handed up to the high sides of ships with admirable skill, and short shouts echoed plaintively and incomprehensibly for outsiders across the murky canal water.

Almost silently, the boat glided on, passing the entrance to the linden canal and its model gardens, now under the care of a head gardener whose name Baldur did not even know. With careful strokes, the sailors crossed the second main canal, which, at a width of twelve hundred feet, looked like a small sea inlet. Here, the city's water patrol regulated intersecting traffic by means of colored flags, which, at night, were replaced by matching lanterns.

Once again, the keel rushed through lonely, narrow waterways, flanked on both sides by tall, oppressive office buildings, whose colorful stories projected out toward the canal. Here, the representatives of foreign trading companies had made their homes, packed tightly onto two small, canal-surrounded islands, with every inch of land built upon. Then followed gardens and public parks with playgrounds and racetracks, and then—already near Asgard—the city's most prominent hermitage, with its religious schools, its houses for neglected children of foreign peoples, the work departments for wanderers, homeless sailors, and former pirates, who, in exchange for lodging and meager fare, worked there for a time until their restless blood drove them out again. Baldur Wieborg cast a brief, irritated glance at the extensive complex. What was considered a charitable institution in Atlantis, to him was a disgrace. Here, they treated only the outward symptoms of a disease, not its root. This whole block, too, would one day have to be swept away, with or against the will of the pious hermits. Unlike the mass of idol-priests, these hermits were unmarried, few in number, but supported by a great host of working and serving brothers, whose long yellow robes occasionally flashed between the garden's trees. The hermitage of the "Gracious Earth Mother" was a power in the realm of Atlantis, supposedly very wealthy and with great influence over its daughter-foundations all over the world—and thus also over the Venerable Father Amenor Lochi in Urd.

Baldur Wieborg was almost surprised when his little galley docked at the well-known King's Bridge of the innermost main canal. With friendly thanks to the two sailors, he went ashore, hurried up the steep stairs to the street, and crossed the broad roofed bridge into Asgard.

Herr Herbing Ase Kopping was not at his office. He was away in the mountains with the King of the Reich, hunting stags. In this way, the young assistant was even more master of the cool halls of the Imperial Office than he usually was. Indeed, what Warager Torgaard had written to the swordsman was true: the old castellan had had enough of his assistant. The ruthless way the young, hard will radiated from the otherwise good-natured core leadership of the Atlantean military had become so obvious over the past year that the army commanders in the borderlands would turn over letters and decrees from the homeland three times before deciding to open them. Yet, there was one quality they could not deny the new wind blowing out of Atlantis: it was invigorating, and it enhanced the Reich's prestige. Supplier prices for the army and for war had pleasingly fallen since Herr Kopping was no longer conducting negotiations himself. The incident with the merchant Morjang Trulbe had been downright dreadful—Wieborg had, in the truest sense of the word, brought him to his knees, and only the decisive intervention of the War Office's director had spared the High Sun Gate from a public scandal, and that only because the merchant, under heavy price concessions, had refused to give more details about the origin of the delivered military tunics.

On the stone worktable in the castellan's hall lay a sealed folder, to which a young official of the Imperial Office immediately drew Baldur's attention as he entered. It was from Odil Gadirus at the Agni Solar Observatory, and Wieborg had been expecting this letter, as several arrangements regarding his journey to Aargund depended on it.

The contents of the letter were reassuring:

Odil Gadirus to Wieborg.

You can travel without worry. The King of the Reich has also informed the Venerable Father that you have been summoned to Aargund. Of course, this was already known in Urd, as they evidently desire a meeting with the Acora there. Most likely, the High Sun Gate, together with the Duke, wishes to negotiate with you by peaceful means—a sign that, for now, things are not going badly for us. It may also be due to the wishes of the King of the Reich. But this is probably just a coincidental convergence of interests. In any case, you will find your friends gathered in Aargund. The Gate's galley, with Spiritual Counselor Rudeger Ase Marken (an acknowledged Ase like myself, but very loyal to the Papa), sets sail for Aargund tonight shortly after midnight, heading for the eastern tip of Schoongard, the west coast of Gaatland, Brammer Lightship, the Sterkopp promontory on Acora, Halger Lightship, and finally Aargund's royal harbor. All without stopping along the way, so the spiritual counselor can reach the Duke in seven days. As you wrote me, you are taking the mail

galley "Wiking 3." On her, you must count on at least fourteen days, as the "Wiking" calls at several harbors in the Reich. So you will meet opponents in Aargund who have had ample time and opportunity for preliminary discussions. As I know you, this won't bother you. If you go on deck at night in good weather, don't forget to look at the star Heldung, which is again near the Earth and, as the brightest star, stands like a misty little disk in the plane of the wandering stars. In a few years, it will cause us more trouble than it does today. The long duration of my sister's illness worries me deeply. I suspect that the recently deceased deputy Pheras was behind it. That lets you know right away that this man has died suddenly. I wish the King would have the body opened. We would learn quite a lot, which is all rather strange—or at least that's my suspicion. But nothing will happen, for reasons of state policy. Please burn this letter immediately, as agreed.

Gadirus.

A second letter addressed personally to Baldur lay on the table, bearing the seal of the castellan:

Kopping to Wieborg.

The King of the Reich informs me that he is sending you to Aargund. Therefore, I'll be returning to Atlantis tomorrow; I've also had enough of deer hunting. The King asked me for my opinion regarding your request to obtain a teaching position at the university. I supported your request, but had the impression that the King was not inclined to agree. He asked me if I thought you were crazy. After thinking it over for a while, I said no. There are three tickets in the office for the premiere of "Educated Women," a cheerful piece by our new star Frale Lund. I had promised him I would attend, but now I can't. So I'm asking you to represent me and take two of the off-duty Asgard Asen with you—they look quite good in the royal seats of the theater circle. Say a few kind words to the author in my name, regardless of whether the play is any good or not. Be careful in Aargund and on your journey. Your popularity has suffered, at least in some circles.

Kopping, Castellan.

Baldur Wieborg laughed heartily.

So, a comedy before his departure. Perhaps he could use it.

Aargund

Aargund was an "Allvater fief," meaning it belonged to the Lord God of the Nordic Asen, who had come to the Atlantic islands on their swift war-boats countless millennia ago. There were many such Allvater fiefs throughout the entire realm. They were at the disposal of members of the royal families, both those of the state kings and of the king of the Reich. According to ancient tradition, the rocky island of Aargund was the Allvater fief of the heir to the throne.

The island itself was not large. It lay to the north of the great island Acora, the northernmost of the royal states of the Reich, roughly under the solstitial ring of the northern hemisphere. Over the millennia, famous Atlantean architects and garden artists had turned this ancient rocky nest into a paradise. The old, gray watchtower of the first Asen had been left standing, maintained on the outside in the rough, clumsy form and style of the rustic ancestors, with great care taken that not a single stone crumbled, and weathered blocks were replaced with new ones. Inside, however, the old tower had been unobtrusively integrated into the row of modern suites of rooms, and only the thick walls betrayed that one was standing in the stronghold of the first Northmen. The palace of the heir to the throne nestled on a high pedestal against the gray rocks, as if it had grown from them; broad, clear surfaces supported by the high substructure—which had no openings—minimal articulation, and very restrained sculptural decoration gave the whole complex a noble character. Only the double rows of windows in the upper part of the building and the slender pilaster bands on the east side of Castle Aargund, with the brilliant green of the parklands behind, betrayed—by their glowing garlands of roses—the wealthy home of a pleasure-loving prince.

On the west side, the island gradually sloped down toward the sea and spread out into a marshy meadow, crisscrossed by shallow water ditches, and along the low-lying shore bordered by broad, grass-covered dikes over which white seagulls fluttered. Behind this embankment, crouched and sheltered from the wind, was a small fishing village with just a few tidy cottages. About three-quarters of the beautiful, well-tended meadow-lands were allotted to the villagers as a royal fief, while a quarter, bordering the ascending castle gardens, belonged to the Allvater fief. Wheat and rye were grown only on small strips of land on the southern side of the island. These fields technically belonged to the Allvater fief and provided bread for the palace, but had long ago been leased to the fishermen, since the castle of the Acora was inhabited only for a few weeks in the solar year and its provisions were usually brought in by sea from the great island of Acora.

One of the sights of the island was the so-called King's Harbor, which was set almost entirely into the rock beneath the castle, with its entrance on the sheltered east side. Similar rock harbors existed in great number in the capital,

Atlantis, where a series of shipyards were built in deep arches under the canal streets along the banks; and on the island of Aargund, this had been imitated, though without the shortage of space that had led to such arrangements in the capital's core. True, the King's Harbor of Aargund could not be entered by the mighty war and merchant galleys, but the mail packets of the Imperial Postal Service, with their masts—and in light winds, even with sails hoisted—could easily slip beneath the rocky opening and become completely invisible from the sea.

Aargund also had an extensive beacon and signaling station, whose polished parabolic mirror could, even in bad weather (by means of several lightships like those at Halger and Brammer), connect directly with Asgard by relaying across the stations at Acora, Gaatland, and Schoongard. At night, liquid "explosive fire" was used for signaling, burning with a white, very bright flame. This meant that communication could be achieved across many day-journeys in just a few minutes; indeed, in good weather—and the fortunate islands of the Motherland Atlantis almost always enjoyed good weather—the light signals reached along the coasts of Africa and Tiahusinyu, out to the furthest borderlands of the world empire. In the moonless spring season, the Atlantean islands nearly formed a land bridge between the two great continents of the Old and New Worlds, and the signals of the central government were understood in Gondwana, Egypt, Sumeria, and Hellas just as quickly as in the lowlands of Tiahusinyu. Only the highlands of the Andes, with the ancient city of Aztlan at the lake of Tihuanaku, usually had to forgo this method of communication because of frequent mountain clouds. There, drum signals or mounted messengers ensured news delivery within a few hours or days.

As the mail galley Wiking 3 cast off from Sterkopp Harbor on Acora and set sail across the broad strait toward Aargund, a slim racing boat broke free from behind the Halger lightship and headed directly for the lumbering Wiking with snow-white wings spread. At its low stern sat a tall Ase, hunched in the recessed steering box, his broad fist on the tiller of the slender vessel whose bronze-covered rail was nearly skimming the water's surface. On the high, arched prow, a slender girl perched on a blue silk cushion behind the rising dragon's neck, with its bared head and glowing ruby eyes; blue, clear, radiant child's eyes peered with excitement toward the lumbering mail galley, which, with good-natured perseverance, let the green clapping waves of the shallow sea strait dance around its stately hull. True, the old Wiking 3, doing its best to make good speed, had both short masts hung with canvas, the sails bulging like chubby hemispheres, but its broad body, reminiscent of a prosperous city merchant in Atlantis, had to work hard to push aside the heavy waves. You could hardly expect older, stout gentlemen to race like young horses. That was left to the slender, golden "Water Lily," which ran all the faster. She had the advantage, too, since she was running with a following wind toward the mail galley, which had to beat upwind—something it didn't much care for. So the dainty racing boat closed in with the speed of the wind, and the young girl

behind the dragon's head watched with delighted eyes as the fat mail ship grew ever larger out of the waves.

"Lady Armane!" called the man at the helm. "I think your visitor is there on the afterdeck of the Wiking. I don't know Mr. Wieborg myself, but of the two men leaning side by side over the rail, it can only be the taller one."

The royal maiden turned around briefly.

"If you head a little more to port and catch the wind, Herr Hagenot, we'll come right up behind the merchant's stern."

Armane felt like a pirate queen hunting clumsy merchantmen. Her blue eyes sparkled at the man on the tiller in blissful anticipation. The next moment, though, her delicate nose was pressed beside the dragon's neck as she peeked again at the taller of the two men on the mail galley's afterdeck. Ah, she had known long before Herr Hagenot Skullorn that her Baldur Wieborg was standing there. The royal maiden had been taught and disciplined enough by now that she almost thought of putting "Herr" before Baldur's name—but that was only by accident, because such a dignified chaperone sat at the back of the little racing galley. In the young girl's heart, it rejoiced unceasingly: Baldur! Baldur! She wanted to sail right beneath the high stern of the floating washtub, wave to her beloved tall friend, then tack around to overtake the Wiking and keep the game going until both vessels entered the King's Harbor of Aargund under the arched cliff. That it would still take several hours suited her just fine. Afterwards, the waving and the play would be over, for a dreadful crowd awaited her at Aargund Castle—builders, painters, sculptors, clergymen, actors, and harpists whom her father had invited and who filled every guest room in the fortress.

Baldur Wieborg would have to move into the quaint house of the harbor master, which stood in front of the silver castle gate at the stairway down to the King's Harbor. But perhaps that wasn't so unfortunate after all. On Aargund, Armane had much more freedom than on Asgard. Even old chamberlain Gunnar Ase Gepide didn't always trail after her when she went for a walk. The whole island practically belonged to the slender princess; she was at home in every fisherman's hut on the marshy meadows, knew almost all the cows and horses, goats and pigs, knew secret rocky paths that led up to the park wall, and knew the way to two hidden, uncanny caves that ran deep into the mountain, as well as an ancient, round well so deep that one had to wait a long time for a tossed stone to send its echo back up. Armane had free use of a racing galley made of deep black hardwood, with a proper little cabin to sit and eat in, and behind the cabin was even a tiny kitchen with plates and pots and a charming stove whose copper chimney poked up through the fixed deck. An old, friendly captain came with it, and two sailors who were all as silent as the grave—and all of them, more or less, were a little in love with the princess. Yes,

one could sense it. After all, she had turned nineteen by now, and the mirrors in her maiden's room in the old Viking tower loved the truth and reflected it faithfully.

And while Armane—almost unconsciously—connected all these thoughts with Baldur Wieborg, without specifically imagining whether it would really be possible to take her great, radiant friend into every nook and cranny of the enchantingly beautiful island of Aargund (without the powers whose interfering she always, unfortunately, had to reckon with ruining her splendid plans), the golden "Seerose," its dragon's head aglow with love, shot straight toward the Wiking as if it meant to ram the lumbering mail galley.

The captain of the mail galley looked worried. He was just about to call out an order to the helmsman when the "Seerose" swung away and headed straight for the clumsy stern of its prize.

"Well, Mr. Wieborg, looks like that was a close call," the sailor breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm downright afraid of those reckless yachtsmen. If anything goes wrong, we always get the blame."

Baldur didn't answer. His gray eyes were shining with joy at the tanned girl's face, laughing out from beside the grotesque dragon's head and clearly beckoning with her right hand for her friend to come over.

Now the slender boat drew close, and the young princess's voice rang out brightly to the deck of the mail galley:

"Baldur, come to me!"

How quickly do people make decisions?

It varies greatly. Some make them only after long, careful deliberation—and those decisions usually aren't bad. Others hesitate so much that the right moment slips by. Yet for others, the decision comes in a flash, with no drawn-out thought process required, but with an instinctive certainty that this is the one, unrepeatable moment to seize. Baldur Wieborg loved the lightning bolt, whether it struck from the sky or from the mind.

Like a wildcat, he sprang past the lumbering captain of the official mail galley and stood tall on the aft bulwark just as the "Seerose" shot past beneath the stern. What happened next only Wieborg himself truly knew. The backstay, which braced the racing galley's mast against the wind, was suddenly within reach. The captain flung himself into empty air and grabbed the twisted brass cable with both fists, swinging his heavy body in the direction the "Seerose" was moving. And then, as if by magic, he was standing beside the helmsman of the handsome boat, out on the aft deck.

"Wieborg," the swordsman introduced himself politely.

"Pleased to meet you," replied the man at the helm calmly. "My name is Hagenot Skullorn."

A light dawned on the captain. This could get very awkward! He dimly heard shouts of alarm aboard the "Wiking 3" behind him, and if he heard correctly, someone was yelling, "Man overboard!"

But what mattered much more now was this: the gentleman at the helm of the "Seerose," who had so calmly given his name, was King Hagenot of Acora, Brammerloh, and Aargund—a lord one did not simply leap down before without permission. Baldur recognized the high-born man, whom he had last seen at the royal assembly in Asgard, even now dressed in the plain garb of a sailor.

"Your Majesty, I beg permission to come aboard without—" the swordsman began, with due modesty.

"That's not necessary," laughed the prince. "Lady Armane has summoned you on board, and that's all the permission I need."

In the meantime, the royal maiden had used the time to make her way aft with her blue dress. She now held tightly to the backstay, the same one down which her lightning-fast friend had slid like a giant panther, and said simply:

"You're quite reckless, Herr Wieborg!"

Baldur turned around. There stood his lovely princess, her heart-conquering blue eyes shining at him with such open infatuation that King Hagenot Skullorn involuntarily furrowed his brow in concern—and rightly so, for he was drawing a conclusion at that moment which was undeniably correct:

The princess, at least for the time being, was not thinking of becoming Queen of Acora, Brammerloh, and Aargund.

"Reckless, Lady Armane?" asked the swordsman, lowering his gray eyes—alight with golden sparks—into the princess's childlike blue stars. "Even if I am no longer the Asgard Ase in the trapdoor of the Allvater's fief, I have not forgotten obedience when the daughter of Acora commands."

"Obedience!" said the slender girl, shrugging her shoulders, but immediately realized that Baldur could not speak otherwise in the presence of Lord Hagenot Skullorn, and so she offered her slim hand to her friend. Now she watched intently as the proud blond head bowed over her tanned, slender fingers;

and she would gladly have taken the opportunity to stroke the short hairs at the nape of the swordsman's neck against the grain, just as she had sometimes done as a child when Baldur would examine the half-torn arm of her doll to assess the damage.

"They've figured out on the Wiking that Herr Wieborg didn't drown," laughed the king, for whom the greeting was taking too long. "Now, I'd ask everyone to take their seats, since I want to catch the wind. I think we'll head for Aargund and signal the arrival of the fat old Wiking."

The packet boat had taken to the oars and was beating into the wind; in fact, it had performed the required maneuver just because of Baldur Wieborg. Slowly, the lumbering hull came back into the wind, but before the sails could fill and give the ship the necessary headway, the "Seerose" with its laughing crew slipped right past the diligent mail boat. The captain had made his way to the bridge and shook his fist; and it was just as well that the wind scattered his words, for otherwise Armane might have learned just how incredibly rich the Nordic language of the Atlantean Asen could be—and how well suited to faithfully expressing one's innermost feelings.

Baldur Wieborg was quite surprised at the apparent degree of anger hurled from the command bridge into the wind, accompanied by a slew of less-than-polite words. He did not know that the ship's captain had received a short letter from the royal household of the Torgaards, impressing upon him the importance of ensuring Herr Wieborg's safe arrival in Aargund. Since the old King of the Reich wished, for reasons of Baldur's moral education, to keep this concern hidden from the swordsman, the captain had been obliged to keep silent—hard as that was for a seaman. But later, during a conversation with the captain in Aargund's King's Harbor a few days later, Baldur did get to see the letter, and the two men, despite all the uncivil words exchanged, parted as good friends.

Meanwhile, the distance between the "Seerose" and the "Wiking" widened quickly. Baldur and Armane sat contentedly side by side, looking at each other, but were well-mannered enough not to neglect the poor royal helmsman.

"I brought you something, Lady Armane," said Herr Wieborg with a mysterious expression.

"Shall I guess?" asked the princess.

"It's not hard," the captain smiled. "I've brought it to you now and then for years, although the Duchess didn't always approve."

"A candy stick!" the girl beamed.

"No, two," replied the swordsman calmly, reaching into the breast pocket of his traveling coat and producing the delicious sticks that one could buy at the fair halls in Atlantis—two for a small copper coin. "Now you have the opportunity, high lady, to pay Lord Hagenot, the state king, my fare—since you summoned me aboard."

Herr Skullorn put on a good face. What else could he do? The tall captain had an ally who made it possible, by roundabout means, to offer a candy stick to a young state king of Acora! It was really outrageous impudence, and yet so amusing that an official frown would have been out of place.

The king had already been staying several days with Duke Wittmund Torgaard in Aargund and knew the reasons that had led the Acora to ask the King of the Reich, Warager, to send Captain Wieborg. But now he told himself that this posting might have been a mistake—no less a mistake than the request itself. As the only princely ruler in the Ten-Kingdom Atlantis who was still unmarried, his deepest wish was to make the lovely daughter of Duke Wittmund Torgaard his queen. The Acora knew this, and yet he had let this Wieborg come. In fact, it almost seemed as if there were other, weightier reasons for the summoning of the young swordsman to Aargund—reasons that must not become public, and which perhaps had to do with the interests of the High Sun Gate. For that the benevolent attitude of the Venerable Father of Urd in the whole affair was noteworthy had become clear during the first discussions with Spiritual Counselor Rudeger Marken at Aargund Castle.

That Captain Wieborg was not without danger when it came to matters of the heart was as clear and bright as the sun, which in the west was approaching the horizon of the Atlantic sea behind the Halger lightship. True, King Hagenot Skullorn did not consider the foreign captain so foolish as to harbor hopes for the hand of the royal maiden, but a free choice out of affection was, given the circumstances, no longer an option for the King of Acora, Brammerloh, and Aargund. Herr Hagenot had heard much about Herr Wieborg at the heir's castle, knew that he was a farmer's son from Angellandic Thule, and had learned that the spiritual counselor of the Venerable Father of Urd, Herr Rudeger Ase Marken, had urgently advised the duke to draw the unusually alert and lively mind of the young captain to his side and, in particular, to provide him with a sphere of activity that would remove him from the confines of administrative work at the Imperial Office for War.

Was the young assistant's work in the War Office of the High Gate perhaps problematic? Was this why another position was to be found for him in Aargund?

That this "other position" on the first day consisted of turning the young princess Armane's head with candy sticks and shining eyes was, hopefully, not what the duke had intended.

But whatever the case, Herr Hagenot Skullorn, after a friendly "Thank you," put the candy stick meant for him in his mouth with little royal ceremony—and was quite surprised to find it didn't taste bad at all. Kings seldom receive such simple treats, and when they do, they are surprised at how good they are. Baldur Wieborg watched with great satisfaction as the nobleman adapted to the situation and said:

"I must once more express my thanks, Lord State King."

"For giving you a ride in my racing galley?" asked the helmsman.

"No, for the kind welcome," the captain replied. "I know things could have turned out otherwise, and that wouldn't have been very pleasant for me."

"Maybe I liked your wild leap onto the deck," laughed the distinguished sailor. "But if you intend to do it that way every time..."

"Such wildness should be rare, or else it loses its value," Baldur replied cheerfully. "I assure you, too, that my jump onto the 'Seerose' was well considered."

The mail galley shrank into the distance, and before the dragon's head of the racing boat the magical splendor of the green island of Aargund rose ever higher from the evening-red sea. The castle blazed in bloody flames that the sun kindled on its battlements and roofs, and the roses between the rows of pillars in the park glowed like precious, hanging tapestries embroidered all over with rubies. At the entrance to the royal harbor, the signal fires glimmered like blinking eyes on stone pedestals, and in the channel just ahead, yellowish guiding lights flickered atop rocking buoys against the blackness of the harbor arch.

King Hagenot Skullorn steered close-hauled toward these buoys on the dying wind, then tossed the mooring rope to glide into the lee of the high castle cliffs. Like a great dead fish, the first buoy slipped past to port. Baldur Wieborg pulled a short oar out from under the thwart and dipped the blade in long strokes into the deep blue water of the harbor entrance, where starfish lay on the bottom and lively crabs fought their battles. Tiny fish darted around the boat, nudging the sturdy outer walls with their delicate noses; bubbles of air clicked up from the sandy floor to the surface, and then the "Seerose" glided silently and stiffly into the blue shadows of Aargund's royal harbor.

The head of the small harbor office stood at the landing steps and received King Hagenot with a respectful bow. He was certainly surprised that a man had arrived at sea in such a mysterious way, but he didn't ask. He would find out soon enough, for Armane Torgaard immediately informed him—quite insistently—that this was Captain Wieborg from Atlantis, who was supposed to arrive on the "Wiking 3" but was already here, and that the harbor master should take him into his house, as had been arranged.

"It wouldn't make any sense for me to say you should come to the castle with us, Herr Wieborg," the princess said to her friend with a sigh. "Your luggage is still on the Wiking, and you can only visit my father if you're wearing a proper uniform."

At the top of the broad stone steps in front of the harbor master's house, they parted ways; the King of Acora and Brammerloh went with Armane Torgaard through the silver-studded grand gate into the castle, while the swordsman Wieborg followed his host to the harbor master's quarters.

The next morning, Baldur reported to the duke. He had to wait a long time in a tiny waiting room, whose oppressive splendor was almost stifling. The low walls were hung up to the ivory-paneled ceiling with tightly arranged strands, and on each strand were strung colorful, perforated gemstones, almost all only lightly polished, yet still gleaming with a lively brilliance. These countless stones formed figurative and plant motifs, which—with the slightest difference in color—looked like faintly breathed-on little pictures, pictures that became almost alive and changed comically when a breeze drifted through the open window. Then the little stones clicked against each other as if a thoughtful hand were lightly strumming the top strings of a great harp.

Baldur amused himself by watching a strung-up stag, which at one moment stretched out as if to run, and then contracted again as if in pain, and he admired the roses made of pale ruby chips, which in the morning draft seemed to breathe, blooming out and then shrinking back into buds.

On the table of brown-black precious wood, over a silk doily, lay a folder with drawings showing new projects for Aargund, plans by the architect who had to fulfill the far-reaching wishes of the art-loving duke—and who had the good fortune that money and valuable building materials were of secondary concern. As Baldur looked through the pages, he began to think he must have lost track of time, because the castle had been very quiet as he walked through the long corridors and narrow staircases. It seemed as if everyone in Aargund was sleeping in that morning. From his window in the harbor master's house, the captain had heard music and laughter and seen lighted windows at the castle long past midnight, after he'd been woken by the unusual nighttime activity. But after all, it was quite right for the duke to spend his days off joyfully in the cliff castle. In Asgard, in Atlantis, King Warager of the Reich expected early rising

and liked it when the duke had already finished his ride to the practice fields outside the city at sunrise. Here in Aargund, the Acora didn't need to inspect troops, didn't need to check weapons and equipment, didn't have to give the lord father any briefings on supply matters to Tyrrhenia by sea and land, and didn't need to feign an interest in the principles of administration in Upper Egypt.

Wieborg thought as a good captain should: He was paid less than the heir to the Reich, and for that he had to wait.

In the meantime, however, Herr Wieborg was getting bored, so he leaned out the broad window with its silver-hammered drapes and marble windowsill, poking his nose into the fresh morning air of the green island. And behold, the morning became thoroughly delightful, for down below, at the edge of the harvested rye field, sat a young girl reading a slim leather-bound book. The high castle walls provided pleasant shade, and the wide, sunlit sea with its white streaks of distant sails shone with calming smoothness. There was no doubt that this young girl was the princess, Armane Torgaard—for enamored eyes recognize the other side even from the blonde, round back of a head and the twisted braids.

For a while, Herr Wieborg deliberated. He would have liked to whistle or throw something, but that wasn't possible—he was wise enough for that. Finally, he decided to call out very softly, something Armane would know, something sure to rouse her from her deep reverie. Baldur thought of the trapdoors in the royal garden of the Allvater's fief in Atlantis and called out, just loud enough:

"Honey debt, the key!"

The little leather book immediately tumbled into the grass. A young girl's body shot up and stood, blissfully slender, face raised high toward the castle. And though there were many windows in Castle Aargund, it seemed that on this morning only one captain was looking out, for with two raised, slender arms, the princess sent her jubilant morning greeting:

"Baldur!"

When two such young, blossoming children of life belong together, there's little that can be done about it, and longing tugs so strongly that Armane felt almost weightless, as if she might just float up to seize her big man's head in both hands—and turn it. Armane was no longer a child, and all the unconscious tenderness gathered over the years now wanted to blossom. Baldur was in despair—there wasn't a single flower to be found in the entire waiting room, and he couldn't possibly rub the gemstone chips from the artificial garlands on their silk threads to toss them down as a greeting to the princess.

But what was the golden sun cross on the hilt of his service belt for? If the sword's pommel hung over it, no one would even notice if something was missing. A quick flick of his short sidearm, and the clasps tore out of the leather. The sword lay on the marble sill, and the little sun cross sailed, spinning and fluttering in strange, gliding arcs down into the depths, even rising for a while as a gust of air lifted it, then drifting determinedly into the stubble of the rye field. The princess had sharp eyes and followed the uncertain flight of the golden messenger keenly. With long bounding strides—certainly not to the Duchess's liking, but to Herr Wieborg's delight—she dashed toward her prize like a kestrel, and soon after held it high aloft.

At that moment, Baldur Wieborg was so happy that he thought of nothing but the lovely princess down in the green below, and was quite surprised when a hand lightly touched his shoulder.

"Well, Herr Wieborg, are you drinking in the fresh air of Aargund?" asked a deep voice.

Baldur, after a last look at the astonished princess—who had clearly seen her father's head and arm—turned around. With his service belt askew and without his sword, Baldur stood before the heir to the throne of Atlantis, and the helmet, which by regulations he was supposed to carry under his arm when reporting, lay on a low, silver stool. But between the stool and the captain stood the Acora, studying his visitor with a scrutinizing gaze.

"What is that bare sword doing on the windowsill?" he asked, suspiciously and not at all kindly. Even though he was generally indifferent to the uniforms of all the sword-bearers in the realm, he had, thanks to his exalted father's fondness for such things, such precise knowledge of them that he immediately noticed the missing sun-cross on the sword belt. Herr Wieborg had, indeed, lost a bit of his composure and tugged at his belt, as though that could somehow fix the problem. Discipline was ingrained in his bones, and he was annoyed with himself for having to appear before the high lord in such a state.

"I just didn't have a rose on hand…" Baldur explained, rather vaguely. The duke stepped to the window and looked out. Below, his daughter was still standing, waving up at her father. The stern expression on his face seemed not to please the princess, so she did the one thing that took the sting out of the awkward moment. She called out in a bright voice:

"Father, don't scold Baldur Wieborg. It's all my fault." The duke turned his slender, fine head.

"Do you understand that, Captain Wieborg?" he asked.

"Lady Armane isn't at fault," Baldur protested. "I threw my sun-cross from my belt down to her, and the high lady bears no blame for that. I only meant to thank her, belatedly, for taking me along on the 'Seerose.'"

"I see," the father said, in a voice that gave no hint as to whether he was now satisfied, and then he added a curt, "Come."

While the duke, wrapped in a silken, snow-white morning robe, walked back over the treacherously soft carpet of the waiting room into his reception chamber—from which he had entered unnoticed—Baldur slid his sword into its sheath, with a quick movement snatched up his helmet, slipped back to the window to send the princess a farewell wave, and then followed the Acora through the tall, polished blackwood door.

The duke sat down in a broad, heavily yellow-silk-padded chair and gestured for his guest to take a seat opposite. But before Baldur complied, he rattled off his official report, with the composure and confidence he was accustomed to—qualities which had only briefly left him because of the princess.

For the first time, the heir to the throne smiled, perhaps at the contrast between the Wieborg before and after passing through the waiting room door. And the captain breathed a sigh of relief. Official displeasure could be weathered, but paternal wrath was unpredictable, and it was certainly debatable whether it was proper to toss golden crosses—which were state property—to princesses.

"Thank you for your report, Herr Wieborg," the prince replied, in his soft, deep voice, which sounded a little tired and very dignified. "I must admit, however, that I had imagined our meeting would be rather different."

"Your Grace, it is not customary for warriors to ask for forgiveness," replied the captain coolly. "All that remains for me is to ask for punishment."

The Acora turned his gray eyes on the swordsman in surprise, utterly unable to understand. Then he quietly shook his head and again indicated the chair, upon which Baldur now took his seat.

"Punishment?" repeated the heir to the throne. "Why?"

"For my conduct unbecoming of an officer in the antechamber," answered Baldur Wieborg.

Now the Acora laughed; this laughter spared the aging man, and it revealed a row of white teeth, only in a few places repaired with hammered platinum. Then he explained kindly that, here in Aargund, he had no understanding for such trivialities, and that his earlier remark had been meant in

an entirely different sense. He had expected Wieborg's demeanor to be less modest. This expectation, he said, had a reason that the captain surely knew. Baldur denied it.

"I know of no reason that would prompt me to display any immodesty toward the Acora of the realm," he said proudly.

"Not even if a drawn weapon were in your hand against me?" the prince asked calmly.

"I know of no weapons against the royal house of the Torgaards," said the captain.

The Acora raised his hand, as if to prevent his guest from saying more; his face grew dark and almost disdainful.

"Wait, dear Captain," he said with a touch of irony. "I've been told you possess certain documents from Urd—at least the certified copies. My father appears to know of them…"

"Yes, Your Grace," Baldur Wieborg confirmed. "The King of the Reich has received certified copies."

"Exactly!" said the master of Aargund, with poorly concealed irritation. "That is all I've claimed or believed. — So let's have clarity between us, Captain! How does that square with your assurance that you know of no weapons against the royal house of the Torgaards? My father is, as you surely have noticed—since you've often been a guest at Asgard and it's now proverbial throughout Atlantis—not exactly delighted with his heir. So you were aware of the tense relationship between my father and myself. Yet you sent the documents to the King of the Reich without notifying me or consulting with me first. You used to find your way easily enough through the trapdoors into the Allvater's fief. — As for how you obtained the documents, let's not discuss it. I have only one word for it: burglary."

"I immediately reported myself for punishment, Your Grace," Baldur Wieborg replied icily. "Even today I am waiting for my arrest. I knew in advance that the penalty must be years of heavy imprisonment. Instead, the King of the Reich sent me to Aargund. Was he not entitled to punish me?"

"No. You knew you would remain unpunished," the duke snapped, but then controlled himself and continued more calmly: "It may be irrelevant to me what the king or other people—or even you—think of me, but the negotiation of the treaty I concluded with the High Sun Gate in favor of the Asen nobility, and the handing over of this document to Herr Warager, is a hostile act—thus a weapon, which you claim not to have against the house of Torgaard."

"Under other circumstances I would now be obliged to request permission to depart Aargund," Herr Wieborg replied calmly. "But since the serious charges you bring against me are unfounded, I may remain. I deny—with all due respect—that I have committed a hostile act against the king's family or, above all, against the heir himself. After I had stolen the documents, I examined them thoroughly for any danger to the state before making copies. And not just once, Your Grace. It's true I intended to present all the documents to the King of the Reich, since I believed it my duty to provide him with irrefutable evidence of the High Sun Gate's actions. — The treaty which the Acora of the Reich concluded with the Gate had to be withheld. It has not been presented to the King, and is known to only three men in the realm: the Papas of Urd, Amenor Lochi; Your Grace, Duke Wittmund Torgaard; and myself. There is only a single copy, and that belongs to me. The original and the copy are my only weapons against poison and dagger, which have threatened me since my daring leap into the palace of the Venerable Father—but they are not weapons against the Acora of the realm."

"Quiet!" requested the master of the house, and he rose to open the door leading from the reception room to the corridor. There, an employee of Aargund Castle was walking back and forth. The duke then opened the door to the great banquet hall. Here, too, there were a few servants setting the midday table for thirty guests, but no one else who might have overheard. The door to the waiting room was soundproof. When the lord of the castle sat down again in his armchair, he gazed thoughtfully ahead.

"The king ordered you to return the documents to the Venerable Father," he said. "Did you do that? I mean, did you return all the documents?"

"No, Your Grace," replied the captain. "I kept the treaty with the High Sun Gate. So even the King of the Reich does not know of it. And Amenor Lochi will never, ever get that agreement with the Gate back, as long as I live—not even if your lordship were to find out about it somehow and order me to do so after the fact. I'd rather be expelled from the army for insubordination. I also don't believe that Amenor Lochi will ever receive your signature again, for by now it has become clear that this agreement was used against the Duke of the Realm—as a silken cord, again and again, a cord around the neck which the Venerable Father could tighten or loosen at will…"

"The agreement was made in good faith," said the Acora quietly.

"I know," the captain affirmed. "It was meant to secure the highest and most prominent posts—even in the offices of the High Sun Gate—for pure-blooded Asen. But the price was too high. The guarantee of the rights of embassies at all courts at home and abroad after the death of King Warager leaves room for many interpretations. 'A state within a state'—that's been talked

about for a long time, and to this day there are no embassies of the Papas of Urd in Asgard. Venerable Fathers who are allowed to have an envoy in Asgard are independent princes, no longer bound by the laws of the state kings; they are no longer subject to the sovereignty of the Reich…"

"If an Ase holds the diamond seat of the high priest, if pure-blooded Northlanders occupy the top ranks of the ruling clergy, such concerns become irrelevant," the Acora objected vigorously.

"If a Northland Ase is allowed to insist on a right, he is as stubborn as a buffalo," replied Wieborg firmly. "The leader of the priest-state would defend his written rights as an Ase with head and sword—even against the royal house of the Torgaards and all the other nine royal houses of the Atlantean confederation. When a Northlander commits himself to the nonsense of idolatry, he becomes unbearable—not out of love for this nonsense, but out of loyalty to the office he has taken on. In a few decades, we'd have the very condition that now constantly threatens us: the encroachment of the High Gate upon the kings, the domination of Urd over Asgard. — I am a lucky child, Your Grace. I did not know what I would find in the treasury vault of the temple palace in Urd, even though I suspected. I staked everything on a single throw of the dice, and I love honor and life as much as any young Asgard Ase or farmer in the whole realm. The coup at the Gate forced open access to the state for me. Now it is done, and there's no going back. I could have made things easier for myself. Now the king can write to say he is angry with me, and Lord Burggraf Herbing Ase Kopping, that my popularity has suffered. I know why. — The journey to Aargund was not easy for me."

"I was also surprised that you came," admitted the Acora in a gentle voice. "What do you hope to gain from your journey to me? Honor? Increased reputation and promotion? Or more?"

"More, Your Grace," Baldur smiled.

"And that would be?"

"The heart of the Acora," replied the captain quickly and warmly.

The heir to the realm was silent for a while and regarded his counterpart with enigmatic eyes.

"You have a strange way of winning hearts, Captain Wieborg," he then said with open sarcasm. "Do you force love with such means? Doesn't this approach bear a desperate resemblance to the silken cord which, as you believe, the Venerable Father Amenor Lochi has tied around my neck?—Who holds the cord today? A lowly captain from the Reich Office of old Kopping!"

"I know how to win hearts, Your Grace," Baldur Wieborg replied. "It's truly not arrogance. People make it so easy for me, and I'm not so foolish as not to notice it. I don't even know if it's deserved or undeserved. It just is. — Clarity, openness, kindness of heart—these are innate and for which no one is responsible, they are not merits, but they are compelling weapons in the battle for hearts. Love of truth, contempt for lies in every form—these are the means of struggle that may create opponents, but draw pure and good hearts to me, whether they wish it or not. — That's why I will win the heart of the Acora as well."

The master of the house smiled involuntarily, though he hadn't intended to be particularly accommodating toward Baldur Wieborg.

"Does flattery also belong to these clear weapons?" he asked.

"No," Baldur replied.

"Seemed to me it did," said the duke. "Don't you want to win my heart? Wasn't the prerequisite that it be pure and good?"

"It depends on faith, on conviction," replied the captain. "And I have that faith."

"But is it desirable that the cord remains in your hands?" asked the Acora bitterly.

"I'll give it back to you if you burn it," said Baldur Wieborg calmly and deliberately. "The original and the copy. I need no noose if I can win your heart."

"You seem to have won over my father. People say you have achieved what even his own children could not: to win his heart."

"I didn't make any special effort," the swordsman laughed. "I only make an effort where it's worth it in the battle for hearts."

"So with me?" the duke replied, drawn out.

"Yes, with you, Your Grace," the captain said firmly.

"I have taken a heavy burden from you, and it was worthwhile for the sake of the Reich. But in winning your heart, Your Grace, the work would be only half done—for with your heart alone, even the little captain from the War Office could get no further. From now on, my courtship is for your Nordic soul, unless you prefer to relieve me of the task in time, or take your heart back. What matters here, as everywhere, is only the voluntary decision, the conviction—not

any pressure or silken cord that only awakens the desire to be freed from a troublesome helper."

"I understand," the master of the house interjected. "But here, worldviews are clashing, Herr Wieborg. I consider the legal binding of the people to religious service necessary, because the people need an anchor they lack in their own deficient moral strength. You, on the other hand, are said to be a denier of the divine, and your attitude toward the High Sun Gate supports this rumor."

"Whether the Spiritual Counselor Rudeger Ase Marken or even the Venerable Father of Urd can or may deliver a useful judgment on my worldview, I doubt," Baldur Wieborg replied firmly. "I believe the enemy is not in a position to do so, and the Gate is, by my conviction, the enemy of the Reich—and thus mine as well. I deny only the childish, human conception of a personal god or gods with their dubious human traits—traits for which we Asen ought to be ashamed, were they attributed to us. The Divine cannot be managed or defined by men. Every attempt to do so ends in imperfection or—worse—in the ridiculous. That may sound subversive, even blasphemous to some ears. Yet I wish to overthrow nothing, and I do not. For what I have said is ancient and hallowed. The symbol of my Nordic ancestors is enough for me, the symbol of divine purity: the sun. Many consider our forebears' conception outdated and childish, and yet it is greater than the impossible notion of a multitude of idol-beings that have, over time, proliferated across the islands of the Reich. The simple, easily grasped symbol of the divine is enough even for the simplest sailor from the people. To tame criminal natures, we have our criminal law, which is rightly regarded as exemplary throughout the world. As for the lack of idolatry, the Asen people would be richly compensated by the destruction of the stupefying superstition of guilt and the supposed need for atonement by various sacrifices—unworthy of any honorable character. An honorable man does not let others make amends for his mistakes; he bears the responsibility himself. To wrestle with the divine and daily forge and shape it anew within oneself—that is Allvater's secret. To do the honorable thing without regard for punishment or reward, to hold the bright shield before the truth as far as we can grasp it, and to denounce lies wherever we can see them—that has been the worship of the Northland people, and it can be so today. The path is not so difficult, for it is known and sanctified by tradition. It would be far harder to invent a new morality. At that task, I myself might well fail."

"Baldur, you do not know the powers at work in this realm," sighed the duke, resting his slender head in his white hand.

"I don't wish to know them—or only so far as to fight them," came the lightning-quick reply. "I am grateful to fate for being unburdened. No dull bond ties me inescapably to dark forces, no oath binds me whose consequences I do not know…"

"I have no intention of discussing this further with you!" the prince broke in sharply. "First come to understand what you disparage; then we can continue our conversation."

"Not a word of disparagement has crossed my lips, Your Grace. Not even the thought of disparagement has been in my heart," came the calm, yet steely response from the young warrior's resolute lips. "Disparagement means weakness, ignorance, confusion. A clear mind has no need of it. That's why I never disparage. My struggle is more dangerous, Your Grace. I fight with the icy clarity of the spirit. Not pleasant to hear, perhaps! But even that serves, in its way, as a means to draw your soul to me. — You will be the king of this great realm. That's why I fight for you with a brutal relentlessness that must seem quite foreign in the bright, cheerful Baldur Wieborg. You summoned me. You can also send me away again. But even if I must go: the chain of mind I have forged around you will not break—the only chain that honorable men can and should wear. The chain-link of crystal-clear understanding."

"Breaking in is in your blood, Herr Wieborg," the duke retorted as the captain paused to catch his breath. "Breaking into palaces, souls, and hearts. Your fiery spirit is not to my taste. I fear your reasoning, Baldur. I dread the consequences, if I were to accept your chain."

"It is too late, Your Grace," Wieborg smiled. "The chain is in place, and can no longer be shaken off."

"You've already ensnared my child," the Acora said bitterly. "The duchess still resists you, but I know well the signs of the heart. — Beware of the princess, Baldur!" The captain said nothing. Then he slowly pulled two thin, folded pieces of leather from his pocket, tore them in half, and handed them to the duke.

"Here is my shield against poison and dagger," Baldur Wieborg said with a quiet smile. "Men like me don't live long, and torn treaties are no longer protection. Burn the agreement with the High Sun Gate, as I have torn it. — And if then I am no longer needed…"

"Do you take me for a scoundrel?!" the duke burst out, springing from his chair with uncharacteristic energy. Wieborg also stood up.

"No," the captain replied quietly. "I know your heart is honorable— otherwise I would not strive for it. But there can be situations where reason of state must take ruthless paths. — I will speak with Lady Armane as little as possible. The opportunity for that can easily be denied me in Aargund, without arousing suspicion."

The duke regarded the torn pieces of leather, heavy with fate, in his hand, hesitating.

"You've torn up the treaty," he said at last. "Burn it as well. It's possible I owe you much. — And now, come here, Baldur."

Upright and with a formal bearing, the swordsman stepped before the heir to the throne of Atlantis, who laid both hands on his shoulders and, with tired eyes, looked into the lively gray eyes of the young man.

The duke opened his mouth to say something—something that might have meant Baldur Wieborg's complete victory—but just then, after a soft knock, the Duchess Irwing Acora entered.

The lord of the castle let his hands fall from the captain's shoulders and turned his head toward the door.

"Already friends?" asked the daughter-in-law of Warager Torgaard.

Edmund Kiß

Battle of Hearts

The solar observatory Agni was situated within the precincts of the holy temple city of Urd, high in the mountains above the Idafield, whose southern side was bordered by the vast building complexes of the world-city Atlantis. The observatory towered several hundred feet above the temple city, its ancient lava walls reaching out above the white clouds into the blue, transparent air of the earthly equator. The observatory of Atlantis, Agni, was not the highest in the realm, but it was likely the best equipped, under the administration of the government and the High Sun Gate. Solar observatories at over eight thousand feet in elevation existed only in Aztlan, on the high plateau between the twin Andean ranges of Tiahusinyus, and on the Shoan Plateau of the Abessian borderlands. A new observatory was under construction on the Kenyan peak of Zimbabwe, but the sages of the realm were not eager for the honor of being assigned there, as it was remote and surrounded by a still little-pacified population.

Among the many bones of contention between the realm and the High Sun Gate, the observatories were some of the juiciest. The Venerable Father of Urd claimed them by virtue of his office as the supreme servant of the Sun, and the realm did so as well, not wishing to relinquish supervision over such an important branch of Atlantean science. While the Imperial Office for Schools and Science maintained that officials of the imperial solar observatories must remain direct servants of the realm and must not enter into any special arrangements with the High Sun Gate, the clerical power, undeterred by this demand, declared that the science of the sun was so inseparably bound up with the rites of the sun and the stars that officials in these institutions could not—and should not—exist without a spiritual calling. And since, for now, it was not yet possible to enforce the will of the High Sun Gate, the Venerable Father in Urd was in the habit of conferring on the observatory directors and scholars loyal to him the rank designation of Spiritual Councilor—a title that was popular for its free-travel privileges on the ocean-going galleys operated by the temple administration on all the seas of the globe. And since these privileges also applied to the families of those so honored, the rank was much sought after. The Venerable Father also tended to appoint especially distinguished star-sages as High Chamberlains of the Gate, seeking thereby to appear to the Imperial King on Asgard as an equally sovereign and independent prince. The Chamberlains of Urd usually also oversaw the administration of one of the many treasuries of the clerical commercial ventures and received for this an annual salary many times greater than that allotted by the realm for regular observatory posts.

The acceptance of such double earnings could not be prevented, however undesirable it was to the civil administration of the realm, since the scholars—even when holding official positions—fundamentally retained the character of independent researchers, whose activities, even in their private lives,

were not monitored. Thus, it was no wonder that the wishes of the High Sun Gate often found a receptive ear among the directors of the solar observatories, and that celestial phenomena—such as the appearance of a comet or the unexpected flare of a new star in the unfathomable depths of the Milky Way—were gladly interpreted, according to the wishes of the priesthood, as threats and signs from the deity, and accordingly judged by the population. After all, the confirmation of such uncanny events as ominous omens of the wrath of the gods was issued by completely official imperial authorities! Who, then, could doubt that the high clergy were right when they called on the common people to do penance in good time? If the wrath of supernatural powers could be appeased by offerings of money and animals, the priests deserved praise for their timely warnings—and were always proven right, for diligent sacrifices had ensured that the dire comet never crashed down onto the sinful earth, but instead, appeased, swept out of the sun's realm with an ever-shortening tail.

Since the wandering star Heldung—which so often came threateningly close to the earth and, as experience showed, each time brought greater or lesser misfortune to the low-lying islands of Atlantis—was a matter of penance of the highest order, and thus a source of revenue of the highest yield, one could justly regard the High Sun Gate as a financial power whose full extent was not precisely known, but which—especially due to the tax exemption of all clerical property—could certainly be called immense. To disguise these holdings, the trading galleys of Urd always sailed under the commercial flag of the empire and in the service of some financial or trading house that seemed, at least superficially, to have no direct connection to the High Gate. To the tax authorities, these trading companies presented an overwhelming burden of debt, and any investigation into the source of their borrowed funds usually ended, by astonishing detours, at the coffers of the High Sun Gate, which had "charitably" aided the struggling commerce. At the gates of Urd, however, the tax officials had to turn back.

It was known to them, in fact, that they found little in Urd, for the income from priestly business acumen did not lie unused in the treasury vaults for long, but rather sought—and found—profitable investment in the borderlands of the vast empire, which multiplied the expanse of the motherland many times over.

On the drafting table of the observatory director, Odil Ase Gadirus, lay a freshly sealed document from the Venerable Father in Urd, which, in kind and paternal words, announced his appointment as Spiritual Councilor of the High Sun Gate and expressed the hope that the love and devotion previously shown to the Papas personally, as well as loyalty to the rules of the holy temple service, might, if possible, become even greater.

Warga, the scholar's sister, sat beside her brother in a soft chair that had been brought into the study for her, beneath the stone gallery that carried the

measuring instruments for observing the stars. Down here it was pleasantly cool. Through parabolic, stepped windows set deep into massive walls, daylight streamed in softly and without glare onto tables covered with endless columns of numbers and calculations of the differences in planetary orbits, used for the precise determination of the calendar. This work served as a basis for the priestly star-sages in the border province of Mejiko, who were in the process of modernizing their ancient observatory. The upper class of the Mejikan population showed a remarkable aptitude for mathematics, so that in this border province it could be expected that scientific talent would be drawn from the country itself.

"How quickly the Venerable Father managed to issue your appointment before the Ten Kings' Assembly!" smiled the daughter of the constitutional scholar Weeling Gadirus, playfully turning the walking stick she still had to use in her white hand.

"I'll have to thank Baldur," replied the scholar, with an impenetrable expression but secretly laughing eyes. "To be honest, I'm not entirely comfortable with it. I became Chamberlain of Urd four years ago, and now I have the title of Spiritual Councilor in my pocket. There's not much higher I can rise—unless Baldur one day appoints me as Papas of Urd."

"Today you're going to attack Herr Wieborg on Lochi's orders?" the gardener nodded.

"Yes, Baldur wishes it," confirmed Odil. "He feels secure enough now to escalate the conflict. He hopes for a lawsuit in the Supreme Court of the Realm for blasphemy."

"And Amenor Lochi hopes for that too?" asked Warga Gadirus. "I can hardly imagine that he has a burning desire to drag his conflict with Baldur Wieborg into the public eye…"

The young woman paused and listened outward.

Soft footsteps echoed across the stone slabs of the forecourt, grew louder, and then, after a brief knock, two tall Asen entered, wearing the black official garb of the star-sages of the realm, with twelve snow-white pearls embroidered on the breastplate—the symbol of their profession as astronomers.

For the Ten Kings' Assembly, which took place on Asgard at regular intervals of alternating five and six years, the directors of the solar observatories in the realm and its border provinces had been summoned to Atlantis to make proposals regarding the close passage of the wandering star Heldung expected in the following year. Likewise, almost all the governors and burgraves of the provinces—except those from the highlands of Aztlan and Abessien—had been

ordered back to the homeland to receive instructions on how the populations in their territories were to be protected from the expected floods and earthquakes.

As a result, Atlantis teemed with guests from all the countries of the globe, with the exception of the independent lands of Zipangu, China, and India. For months, the individual meetings of the state kings with their highest officials, with the professional guilds of their countries (who had also sent delegates), and with the officials of the Imperial Office for War had seemed endless. The far-reaching autonomy of the Atlantean state and its border provinces showed a weakness in this case, however well this form of constitution otherwise served a people of Nordic blood; for the Imperial Office demanded unconditional subordination, since it was unquestionably a matter for the Empire, one that could only succeed under the unified leadership of a single authority. The name Wieborg was mentioned for the first time in all assemblies, with bitter respect.

Because of the implementation of safety measures for the people, Burgrave Kopping ultimately could not do without Baldur's cooperation, however inconvenient the young man otherwise was. The handling of the "Heldung question" was assigned to him as a special area. The High King Warager had ordered this in order to invalidate his previous promise to give Captain Wieborg a professorship at the Imperial Academy for General Humanities. Lord Warager Torgaard had hoped that this special assignment in the Imperial Office for War would so completely absorb the young assistant that he would have no time left to prepare his lectures at the academy.

In this, however, the High King was mistaken.

Since the students of the academy, as was well known, preferred to attend their teachers in the late afternoon when the arcades cooled down, Baldur Wieborg scheduled his lectures for after sunset, when the stars flared up in the blue-black Atlantean sky and the evil-bringer Heldung appeared as a whitish, misty disk above the sanctuary of Urd. At first, Baldur's success was minimal. So late, the young and eager-to-learn students did not wish to be "fed" with science. It was much nicer to lie on the beach with one's sweetheart, watching the long white waves, or to practice astronomy in the parks of the capital—a discipline easier to learn than the kind practiced in the solar observatories of the realm.

But that soon changed after the first few lectures. Wieborg usually stood between two burning wax torches, looking at the shimmering white of the few faces whose owners sat in the wide circle of the colonnades or sprawled on the lawns of the lecture gardens. Baldur didn't believe that attendance would remain so poor, for what he presented was far from commonplace—even if the titles posted on the blackboards at the academy entrance sounded extremely dull. The captain taught two subjects: the history of the High Sun Gate and the history

of the Nordic Asen, both of which sounded oppressively like schoolroom fare and initially attracted little attention.

In terms of content, however, Mr. Wieborg's lectures had exactly the intended effect on the youth of Atlantis.

With each passing evening, the colonnades and grassy spaces filled more and more with people who wanted to hear the Asgardian speak—who, despite his belonging to the noble, pure-blooded ruling class, demanded this: that the millions of citizens living on the Atlantean islands, who were still excluded from imperial and state offices because they had not yet been officially recognized, must be unified into a single bloc. This had to happen soon, before further racial decline and the isolation and aging of the pure Nordic blood made the formation of such a people's bloc impossible. After the first lectures on the history of the Asic sun cult, the High Sun Gate sent several clerical councilors into the arcades of the university, armed with wax tablets and styluses, to follow the words of Sword-Leader Wieborg and to jot down keywords for the report to their master, Amenor Lochi.

The presence of a large number of Atlantean princes and leading officials from the border provinces meant that the audience not only grew larger but also became more select. Several sons of the High King were regularly seen among the listeners, and even the daughters of princely houses did not miss the chance to sit at the feet of the learned captain and to learn things that, until then, had only been spoken of in Atlantis in private circles and with much concern. Armane Torgaard, too, had succeeded in gaining permission to attend Baldur Wieborg's lectures. The Duchess had expressed herself very firmly against it, but the princess found an unexpected ally in her father, who, to the Duchess's astonishment, had nothing against his daughter seeking to educate herself in this way—much to the Duchess's bewilderment, as she simply could not understand such leniency in her husband.

On one of these lecture evenings, Armane had also met Warga Gadirus, who had been brought to the arcades of the university in a litter and attracted a certain amount of pity, for she still had to use two canes in order to walk on her own. Out of this acquaintance, over time, grew a deep friendship, which led to repeated visits and return visits in Urd, Agni, and Asgard. Even today, when the two Asic astronomers entered their brother's study, Warga Gadirus had thought it was the princess, accompanied by Gunnar Gepide, coming to the solar observatory. Atlantis, and especially Asgard, was teeming with people—there was scarcely a small spot in the royal gardens that wasn't occupied by some high or highest-ranking gentleman with his wife and daughters or sons, and, as always at a royal assembly, things were quite uncomfortable at the Allvater's estate. That is why Armane often escaped from the castle during such times and came to Agni to visit her friend Warga.

The two astronomers took their seats and asked the beautiful gardener for permission to discuss some technical questions with her brother. For the past several weeks, both gentlemen had also been attending Baldur Wieborg's lectures—initially because they had heard that an ordinary captain was lecturing on the sun cult with the approval of the High King. They had found this quite astonishing, as they considered it unacceptable for a non-scholar to be teaching astronomy. However, after the first evening classes, their concerns were put to rest. Baldur Wieborg did not actually lecture on technical subjects, or only very rarely, but instead focused primarily on the history of the Nordic sun cult, in connection with the history of the Asen. Nevertheless, they did not forgo hearing more from this young teacher, because what he presented caused a stir even among them. Much that was already known—but also long forgotten—was revived there. Wieborg's demand that the purely scientific study of the stars must once again be strictly separated from the mystical service of the sun, which should be carried out by the priesthood, was entirely in keeping with the wishes of the Asic scholars, but it was difficult to achieve, since the ties that had developed with the High Sun Gate over the past centuries now hung like tough shackles on free science.

"May I listen in?" asked the gardener of Urd. "Otherwise, I must kindly ask the gentlemen to have my chair carried out into the pillar gallery."

The two scholars assured her that Warga's presence was absolutely no disturbance to them, and if a conversation about the wandering star Heldung would not bore her, she was welcome to listen. The astronomers began by comparing their measurements regarding the orbital segments of the dangerous wandering star. There was not complete agreement in this regard, since the star's orbit around the sun had changed significantly again since its last close approach to Earth. The Earth's own orbit also seemed to have experienced a certain elongation, at least some observatory directors voiced this suspicion with some justification, since the orbital disturbances must, in any case, be mutual. As another year and a half would have to pass before the next especially threatening encounter with Earth, all the observatories in the Empire were to carry out constant position measurements during this period, and the results were to be continually exchanged via the Reich's signaling network. Thus, as Warga Gadirus noted with satisfaction, there was no doubt among the astronomers that the wanderer Heldung was neither an evil demon nor had anything to do with unknown, but all the more feared, dark spiritual powers. The encounter with this uncanny star was inevitable, regardless of whether or not Amenor Lochi scheduled special atonement services.

"It's remarkable, by the way, how well Captain Wieborg masters his material," said the director of the Simba Observatory, which was located in the south of the African mainland. "The few astronomical comments he made in the context of the developmental history of the Asic sun cult suggest a level of technical knowledge that is at least unusual for a military man."

Odil Ase Gadirus smiled, but did not mention that the technical parts of the lecture had been reviewed in the Agni observatory.

"The Reverend Father intends to order extraordinary sacrifices and prayer services to avert the danger," Warga Gadirus interjected.

Now the two scholars smiled, though it was impossible to tell whether their smile was pitying or simply polite. They answered cautiously that such things certainly could do no harm, as the gods would surely know ways and means to avert a disaster that, according to the calculations of science, was inevitable. But of course, science could not predict the intentions of the supernatural; therefore, it must be left to the Papas of Urd to do his part against the looming danger, for he was generally acknowledged to possess the necessary countermeasures.

Now Warga Gadirus smiled, and here too it was impossible to discern what the smile truly meant. The visiting gentlemen evidently regarded her as an unwavering adherent of the idol-worship teachings of the High Sun Gate. For one thing, they knew that Warga, the daughter of the well-known constitutional scholar Gadirus, was the head of the temple and palace gardens favored by the Reverend Father Amenor Lochi himself; indeed, during her serious illness, the high priest had taken her into his fairy-tale-like mountain palace, Garmalen, and had her cared for there as only someone whose affection one truly values would be cared for. Caution was thus warranted when dealing with the Gadirus family. Among the scholarly circles—especially in the Imperial observatories—it was generally known with which colleagues one could speak openly, and with whom one could not. Certainly, when interacting with Odil Ase Gadirus and his sister, caution was advised. His privileged position close to the Reverend Father alone was a clear warning sign. Added to that was the fact that Gadirus was a so-called "recognized one"—an Ase, yes, but of mixed blood, who in some circumstances stood closer to the High Priest of the Empire (who, as is well known, had a significant admixture of Sumerian Chaldean blood) than was good for a truly confidential conversation.

Moreover, the two visiting observatory directors had very quickly recognized that Odil Gadirus was in even closer association with the High Sun Gate than they themselves were, and that his oft-expressed opinion regarding the involvement of supernatural powers was inevitably affirmative—regardless of his own, unvoiced judgment.

"I sometimes attend Captain Wieborg's lectures," Warga Gadirus continued. "I found his latest proposal—made in connection with the anticipated close approach of the wandering star Heldung—quite surprising. He left open the question of whether the High Sun Gate, with its means, could actually avert the danger, but suggested to the attending spiritual advisers of the Reverend

Father that, at the onset of the flood and earthquakes in Atlantis, they should remain behind and try to hold back the rising waters through prayer and penance, while those who trusted the Reich's measures should, during the period of greatest danger, retreat to the mountains to wait out the dangerous interval there. The success of one group or the other, he said, would show how people should proceed in the future."

The scholars, who had also heard of this proposal (though to their regret they had missed the relevant lecture by Baldur Wieborg), burst out in cheerful laughter, since this very suggestion by the peculiar captain had become a much-ridiculed topic in certain circles in Atlantis. Even the High King, who had a report delivered on the matter, was said to have commented in his characteristic, concise way: "That Baldur will not be promoted. He's too good for higher positions in the military. Must be put to other use. I'll make him imperial scholar for the history of the High Sun Gate one of these days."

Nevertheless, Lord Warager Ase Torgaard had considered it appropriate to sentence Captain Wieborg to forty-eight hours of house arrest for disrespectful behavior toward the High Sun Gate, which Baldur dutifully served out in his little stone house on the first platform of Asgard. However, since the work in the Imperial Office for War had especially piled up during these last days before the royal assembly, the old Burgrave Herbing Ase Kopping was repeatedly seen coming and going at the small house on the first platform during Baldur's confinement, and a young chief scribe had to haul the extensive bundles of parchment containing the guidelines for the so-called "Heldung Measures." After all, Lord Kopping, as the responsible head of the War Office, had to deliver the corresponding reports at the royal assembly in the Poseidon Hall, not the young captain who had prepared them.

"Wieborg got off lightly," remarked the astronomer from the Gaatland observatory. "If one can say such things in public and only get house arrest for it, then it makes you want to hold lectures yourself. We were expecting a harsher punishment."

Odil Ase Gadirus assumed a serious expression.

"I fear that Wieborg's reckless statements will still have unpleasant consequences," he said with emphasis. "In any case, I don't believe the High Sun Gate can allow itself to be mocked in this way without losing face. If I were Amenor Lochi, I would take a very different approach against this young man, who apparently goes out of his way to undermine the standing of the priesthood and the recognized religious teachings. After all, the doctrines of the High Sun Gate are acknowledged as fully valid science. Just imagine if this Mr. Wieborg were to ridicule the science of astronomy in a similar way as he did that of temple service—it's likely he would earn the enmity of all the high and low officials of the imperial observatories; the only difference being that an official

punishment would not be necessary, because the refutation of his statements would probably make him untenable as a university lecturer. The actual punishment would therefore be even harsher."

The two foreign scholars decided not to reply to these words from the director of the Agni observatory, since they only confirmed their impression that, in the vicinity of the Reverend Father of Urd, the spiritual constraints on free science were growing into genuine straitjackets.

Warga Gadirus showed no expression. She had been accustomed for years to concealing her feelings and knew how necessary this dissembling was for Baldur Wieborg to be able to successfully endure his difficult struggle. Just how heavily she bore this false front, perhaps even the captain himself did not fully realize. He marched forward on his relentless path with the radiant nonchalance of a triumphant man of spring, waging his perilous war against the High Sun Gate with force, cunning, intelligence, and a powerful will to attack—perhaps deliberately closing his eyes when he saw his loyal friend suffering. No, Warga corrected herself in her thoughts. Baldur knew exactly what a heavy burden he had placed upon his ally. Had he not, years ago and overwhelmed, wept over her hands when he first visited her sickbed? Had he not written to her from Aargund that he himself might soon be in the same condition as his friend, and that he marveled with each new morning that his limbs were still mobile and not paralyzed and sick like those of his noble-hearted friend Warga Gadirus? Had he not assured her that loyalty forged a bond for life?

The two foreign astronomers were starting to feel a bit uncomfortable in this atmosphere, which was infected by the proximity of Urd, and they began making preparations to end their visit—especially since the conversation about the altered orbital segments of the wandering star Heldung had concluded. They did not manage to leave right away, however, because a servant of the observatory announced the arrival of the Reverend Father Amenor Lochi, who had just arrived accompanied by the princess Armane Torgaard and her knight Gunnar Ase Gepide, to pay a visit to Odil Gadirus.

Warga rose with difficulty from her chair and, leaning heavily on her cane, hobbled out into the pillared hall to greet the Papas of Urd. Odil pushed the chair through the door and took leave of the two scholars with a cool handshake. He made no effort to keep them, since, if the Reverend Father honored him with a personal visit, the high priest surely wished to have a conversation without witnesses.

The siblings awaited their guests in the pillared hall, and Odil walked a little way to meet the distinguished lord. Whenever the Reverend Father moved in public, it always looked very ceremonial and splendid. To shield him from the sun, four black servants carried a silk canopy embroidered with gold, supported by polished hardwood poles, over the supreme priest of the Empire of Atlantis,

and several ecclesiastical counselors and chamberlains in long, purple robes, wearing tall, tiered hats made of polished gold plate adorned with gems, followed with downcast faces behind the silk canopy. Only then came, in stark contrast and unadorned simplicity, the princess Armane Torgaard in a smooth, snow-white linen dress, with the royal chamberlain Gunnar Gepide in a leather cuirass, tall boots, and a plain bronze helmet. Even from a distance, one could see how deeply the chamberlain of the Duchess was annoyed, for he was forced to walk with the princess behind the ecclesiastical counselors as if the daughter of the royal heir was a mere servant girl of the High Sun Gate and he himself a low-ranking temple sweeper of the second or third class.

But Gunnar Gepide's grim expression was also directed at the duke, who had allowed things to come to such a pass that even a pure-blooded Ase had to bow before these idol-priests. The knight was no longer young, and gray shimmered at his temples beneath the helmet. He knew the developments of the past decades as only a chamberlain could. Thus, he was also aware of the love his young charge, Armane Torgaard, bore for the dangerous Wieborg, and he knew about Baldur's struggle with the powers of darkness—how his conflict with the High Sun Gate was secretly referred to among the young and old sword-bearers and ordinary warriors. He permitted himself, in hope of better times to come, a proud, angry, and dissatisfied face. For one could already scent on the wind that better times were approaching. Wieborg must possess weapons that allowed him to shake the very foundations of the High Sun Gate with impunity. Still, it was a pity about the splendid Baldur! To have the Reverend of Urd as an enemy was not only dangerous, but often downright deadly. In the history of the empire, even imperial and state kings had died surprisingly quickly—and, in the opinion of some circles, quite "on time"—when it was said they had ventured too far into the sacred circles of the High Sun Gate and had sought to disturb them.

As ancient as the empire of the Asen was the struggle with the priesthood of idols; and if one assessed the results of this battle today, the Gate was—despite occasional setbacks—advancing with relentless momentum against secular power. Disobedience to the priesthood was usually severely punished by the gods. If a newly demanded privilege was refused, it could easily happen that a major uprising against Atlantic power would suddenly erupt in some remote borderland—supposedly by chance—which nevertheless forced the government to give in in order to prevent worse. Could not resistance among subjugated peoples elsewhere on earth also flare up "by chance" if one remained stubborn?

The driving force behind such accidental misfortunes was, of course, seldom unknown to the government authorities, but the culprits could never be apprehended. If the High Sun Gate was accused of enabling the uprising by distributing funds to foreign or barely subjugated princes, a storm of deep moral indignation would inevitably follow. The priesthood of Urd itself never gave

money directly to such foreign parties. Instead, it possessed an unknown number of loyal helpers and banks all over the world, enmeshing the old ball of the home star like a spider web. Which commercial firms in the borderlands and abroad were caught up in this web, only the Papas of Urd and his closest spiritual counselors knew with any certainty in the whole empire; and even Captain Wieborg's knowledge was incomplete, for no priestly power on earth is so foolish as to entrust its documents with more information than is absolutely necessary.

So if Mr. Gunnar Gepide did not have much hope for the young Wieborg's survival, he was not entirely wrong. The radiant truth—which people foolishly always believe must ultimately triumph over the powers of darkness and lies—had so often been strangled and trampled underfoot that, alongside the hope for better times, a justified doubt also arose as to whether the young, unknown warrior from the Northland would succeed in the gigantic struggle at which countless other men before him had miserably failed.

The Reverend Father Amenor Lochi had appointed a new chief steward and personal adjutant, namely a gentleman from the border region of Mejiko: the Spiritual Counselor Atahualka Chun, a brown-skinned man who now walked with bowed head in the line of other counselors behind the canopy of Zipangu silk. At least for now, this gentleman had not yet felt the need to think and act independently, as the late Pheras had deemed proper in the case of Warga Gadirus. The sudden and, as people said, very timely death of his predecessor had a salutary effect on his brownish soul; in any case, it seemed highly unlikely that Mr. Atahualka would concern himself with the personal matters of his high superior.

Since it was customary to bend the knee before the Reverend Father, the priestly chamberlain and spiritual counselor Odil Gadirus performed this not very uplifting duty for an Ase and knelt down, while Warga, with her head bowed reverently, remained standing, as her still very paralyzed limbs did not allow for the usual gesture of respect.

The two foreign scholars had made themselves scarce, as they would also have been required to perform this act of humility, since, due to their appointment as counselors to the Gate, they belonged to the clerical court of the Papas of Urd. However, because they retained a remnant of Asean pride and Nordic stubbornness, they took the opportunity to avoid this gesture of honor.

The Reverend Father dismissed the bearers and spiritual counselors with the smallest of gestures, and their disappearance took place with a lightning-fast obedience that no earthly ruler could wish for more. Amenor Lochi had aged greatly. The fine, clever features showed thin, barely concealed wrinkles of worry, and, as it seemed to Warga Gadirus, also of fatigue. Although the hair that appeared at the temples under the triple-towered hat of the High

Priest shone a deep blue-black, it could be assumed with certainty that it had been dyed. The young gardener looked into the Reverend Father's eyes with genuine pity, for despite her alliance with Baldur Wieborg, she felt sorry for the highest priestly lord of the empire. Her womanly heart, of course, was not left entirely untouched by the sincere affection of this man. Also, the frequent interactions with him and his constant concern for her health and well-being had stirred feelings of gratitude in her, and her honorable heart sometimes winced with shame when she thought about how she constantly deceived this man with every word and every glance.

Amenor Lochi extended a hand to Spiritual Counselor Odil Gadirus and thereby, symbolically, raised him up from the dust to his own level; but his eyes rested on his beautiful gardener with tender concern.

“My beloved daughter, I see that you still must walk with a cane,” he said, with a sorrow that was as genuine as a god or idol-actor can truly muster.

“The doctors say the paralysis will soon fade,” replied Warga Gadirus, reverently bringing the priest’s broad signet ring to her lips. “In the spring of next year, I will hopefully no longer need the cane.”

“I believe you know, Lady Warga, how earnestly my love for the gods pleaded to take the burden of suffering from you,” answered Amenor Lochi warmly. And with a glance around, he added quietly, “I also believe I have done everything to atone for the guilt.”

The gardener thought of Pheras and his sudden death. Never before had the Papas of Urd so clearly indicated what guilt the treasurer Pheras had atoned for with his death.

Armane Torgaard stepped up beside the Papas of Urd with joyful, blue eyes—carefree and unrestrained, like a young girl who has yet to learn to respect the awe-inspiring powers of this world. But she did ask:

“May I greet Warga, Reverend Father?”

And without waiting for the high lord’s permission, she threw her arms around her friend’s neck and kissed her square on the red lips. Although this was done with suitable, tender care, given the gardener’s condition, the impetuous action of youthful affection was like fresh mountain water. The stiff dignity that had so far unavoidably prevailed at the Papas’ reception yielded to a liberating naturalness, and even the grave, unmoving face of the Reverend Father broke into a faint smile.

"I'll sit here in the gallery with Warga," the princess declared in her bright, fresh voice. "Herr Gunnar!" Armane then called to Chamberlain Gepide. "Please bring me a chair from Herr Gadirus's room."

Amenor Lochi agreed that the two young ladies could chat under the protection of the gallery, while he wished to confer behind closed doors with Spiritual Counselor Odil Gadirus. The director of the observatory, Agni, expressed his thanks for his appointment as Spiritual Counselor before entering the offices, then his words faded to a low murmur and finally fell silent, swallowed by the mighty lava walls of the fortified magnificent building that was dedicated to the science of the stars.

Amenor Lochi appeared once more in the doorway.

"Lady Warga, I would like a brief conversation with you later," he said kindly, without his usual solemn authority. "I mention it so that Lady Armane does not seize the opportunity to spirit you away into the gardens of the solar observatory, where no one—and I might almost say, not even a god—could find you."

Then the friends were alone.

The knight, Gunnar Ase Gepide, sat apart on one of the many marble benches, which, at regular intervals, invited rest around the gallery of the observatory. He placed his long chamberlain's sword between his knees and, with the exemplary calm of an old court official, contemplated the snow-covered mountains of his homeland, admired the white plumes of distant volcanoes, and took pleasure in the narrow strip of blue Atlantic visible from here shimmering between two jagged mountain giants.

Meanwhile, the young women took advantage of the rare opportunity to pour out their hearts—at least, Armane Torgaard did so, with the trusting openness of untouched youth. Warga Gadirus was more cautious. She had forgotten how to wear her heart on her sleeve and listened more than she spoke, or only posed brief questions to the princess, allowing her young friend to chat to her heart's content.

"How was it in Aargund?" the gardener inquired after a while, once Armane had sufficiently aired her complaints about the current unpleasant conditions in Asgard.

The daughter of the Duke of Acora made a sour face. At first, she said, it had been wonderful. She recounted Baldur Wieborg's leap onto Staatenkönig Hagenot Skullorn's "Seerose," the glorious early days on the island, and a short walk with Wieborg and Gunnar Gepide along the beach and through the meadows.

"Good old Gunnar, unfortunately, couldn't be persuaded to disappear," the princess sighed from the depths of her heart.

So, not alone with him, thought Warga Gadirus with relief.

But then, Armane Torgaard continued, things became very boring and unpleasant. She was always alone; Baldur Wieborg constantly had to be either with the duke or with the spiritual counselor Rudeger Marken, and was not allowed to attend to her. The duke had suggested taking Captain Wieborg along on the great inspection tour to the border provinces of Sumeria and Egypt, scheduled for the end of the year. In the end, there was even a bit of a family quarrel, because her mother had suggested that she should more often go sailing with Herr Hagenot Skullorn, either on the "Seerose" or in her own racing galley. But she hadn't wanted to—she knew very well what the whole sailing business with the king of Acora and Brammerloh was supposed to lead to. She wasn't that naive, and she simply had no desire to become Herr Hagenot's queen. There were enough princesses in the realm as it was, and she just didn't want to.

"And why not?" Warga Gadirus asked carefully. "I've heard that Herr Hagenot is a handsome and not unpleasant gentleman, and after all, the daughter of the Acora must choose from among the kings of the realm. To my knowledge, only Herr Hagenot Skullorn is unmarried."

"I can't marry him if I don't love him," Armane replied firmly.

"And what did the Duchess have to say about that?"

The princess laughed. Her mother had wanted to say a great deal, and Armane had already armored herself with stubbornness. But then her father suddenly waved it off. "He doesn't want to force me," she said cheerfully. "Herr Rudeger Marken worked on my mother and handled her, and then Herr Hagenot left. I did feel sorry for him, but I was grateful to Father for giving the king a hint. There isn't a father on earth as good as mine. — You know, Warga, I really think we girls could wrap any man around our finger if we tried hard enough. Men may be clever, may know more than we silly girls, but they all have a weak spot. Don't you think so?"

Warga smiled and kissed her royal friend on the pale temple.

"Certainly, a single girl in the whole realm has every opportunity to take advantage of such weaknesses," said the gardener.

"Should that be me?" Armane inquired.

"Who else?" Warga countered. "But such opportunities are dangerous, Armane. You should only use them if no harm will come of it, and the power of princesses almost always leads to trouble. The love of princesses is bitter."

"I don't find that to be true," Armane Torgaard declared honestly.

"At first it may be sweet," Warga conceded. "But afterwards…"

"I think the 'before' outweighs everything that comes after," the princess replied thoughtfully. "Of course we wish that love could last forever, but our dear relatives make sure that doesn't happen. For once, we princesses want to be happy too, Warga; to love someone we actually like and not someone foisted upon us for reasons of statecraft; you know, Warga, a man who is vastly superior to us in mind and heart, and yet loves us so much that he becomes dizzy just seeing us, a man who flies into our arms just because we have the thought to open them, who—just like us—can forgive everything, and who, for my sake, can think of nothing but me for even a single hour; who can sense it when our thoughts circle him like bright kestrels. We princesses can't ask for more. Every other girl has it easier."

Warga Gadirus looked at her beautiful friend with veiled eyes—her friend who spoke of "us" but really meant herself, while the tall, radiant figure of young Wieborg grew before her mind's eye. She could almost sense that, before Armane's mind's eye as well, the image of Baldur stood there, and a subtle, needle-sharp pain flickered in her heart. And as the pain grew more intense, she tried to steer the princess's thoughts elsewhere. But once the shining image of Baldur Wieborg had appeared, it could not be dismissed like an unwelcome guest, and Armane suddenly began loudly and clearly to grumble about the High King Warager Torgaard, for having sentenced Herr Wieborg, quite unjustly, to forty-eight hours of house arrest. "And why?" the princess asked indignantly. "Only because Baldur told the truth."

"Are you always allowed to tell the truth in your Asgard?" asked the gardener with a friendly laugh.

Armane thought for a moment. Then she shook her head and said that at the very least, people ought to be allowed to speak the truth outside of Asgard.

The conversation between the two friends became difficult, for Armane was one of the enthusiastic admirers of Professor Wieborg and would tolerate no disparaging opinion of the young captain's views. In fact, her opinion matched that of Warga Gadirus exactly, but as a gardener of the temple and palace gardens of the High Sun Gate, she could not express her agreement with the same enthusiasm as the daughter of the Acora.

Thus Warga Gadirus was glad when the Reverend Father entered with her brother. Amenor Lochi asked, without much ado, if he might sit in Armane's chair, and in the meantime, the Reverend Councillor Gadirus should show the princess around the observatory and explain the measuring instruments that were set up on the highest terrace. There was no objection to this request from the high priest, so Odil went off with Armane, and the chamberlain Gunnar Gepide rose from his marble bench with a sigh and dutifully followed his princely charge, always at an appropriate distance so as not to disturb their conversation.

The Reverend Father of Urd sat for a while in silence, waiting until the others had moved away; then he fixed his penetrating, dark eyes on his gardener and asked if she knew the state of the princess Armane's heart.

"I don't know what you mean by that, Reverend Father," Warga replied cautiously.

What did the Papas of Urd have to do with a young girl's heart? But since she knew that, in the circles of the High Sun Gate, politics sometimes involved itself with human hearts, she continued:

"I only know that Lord State-King Hagenot Skullorn is courting Armane—or rather, is supposed to be courting her."

"Quite right," nodded the high priest seriously. "But that's not what I meant. I've already had this matter blocked by my ecclesiastical counselor Rudeger Marken in Aargund. So at the moment, I have no wishes in that direction. My intention, rather, is to bind Captain Wieborg to the Duke's family for a certain time. Your brother suggested I deal harshly with the young man for his statements at the Academy of General Sciences. But apart from the fact that the High King has already imposed punishment, I desire a rapprochement between the young man and the Acora."

The Papas of Urd fell silent and watched the effect of his words. In this case, Warga Gadirus did not need to pretend to be surprised; rather, she was honestly astonished. So Baldur's wish—to gain an opportunity through a public accusation to attack the High Gate—was not going to be fulfilled. Was the Reverend's cause in such bad shape that he had to prevent open conflict?

"May I understand this to mean that Herr Wieborg is to be bound to Lady Armane?" she asked uncertainly.

Amenor Lochi nodded and smiled. His compelling eyes rested with a restrained tenderness upon those of the beautiful, paralyzed gardener, and seemed to delight in watching the young woman strive in vain to guess the purpose of his wish.

"How will the Duke respond?" Warga asked uneasily. "Captain Wieborg is a farmer's son from Thule, poor and without high noble birth. I find it hard to imagine..."

"That's all not so important," replied the Reverend Father. "I am compelled to find ways to divert the young Wieborg from his battle position against the High Sun Gate. I do not fear such attacks in themselves; the priesthood has always come out of them well, but one cannot simply let matters take their own course. The Duke is, if I may say so, highly obliged to me. In any case, it would be difficult for him to refuse my wishes. I can't explain further, and I ask you to believe me. A binding of Wieborg to Armane Torgaard, even if only temporary and not too serious, can deflect the struggle against the High Gate. Unfortunately, at this moment, that struggle is not unfavorable or hopeless for the captain, since the coming unfortunate events that the wandering star Heldung will bring us would favor Wieborg's attacks, if I don't take precautions. But if we succeed in tying him to the princess, I will put him in an uncomfortable checkmate position, one that young people are sometimes not up to handling. — In short, I would be grateful if you would do all you can to encourage any budding affection the princess Armane might feel for Baldur Wieborg. I already have the Duke's agreement for this little game..."

What was going on in the young gardener's heart, the Reverend Father, fortunately, could not see. Thoughts raced through Warga's mind in a flash, but would no longer obey her, for at the same time, the bitter pain she had felt earlier during her conversation with Armane Torgaard flared up again.

What was she supposed to say?

The solar observatory of Agni seemed to spin around her, so much so that she almost didn't know where she was anymore. But this semi-faintness gave her the idea to feign a total faint, and so she suddenly collapsed, her cane slipping from her hand and rolling across the lava slabs of the floor, and her blond head dropped sideways onto the padded backrest of her chair.

Immediately she felt the Reverend Father's arms around her, how a gentle hand lifted her head; and then, whether she wished it or not, she endured the lips of the Lord of Urd upon her own.

The Scribe

The sessions of the royal assembly in the Poseidon Hall of the Asgard were known, from experience, to last a very long time, as always happens wherever many men absolutely want to have their say—whether because they have something noteworthy to express, or because they believe they must justify their existence through a speech or by submitting particular motions.

At the royal assemblies, which according to the constitution of the Atlantean Empire had to take place every five or six years, the accountability reports of the state kings were received by the head of the central government. Depending on the attitude of the reigning imperial king, these reports could be a pleasant, if somewhat tedious affair, or else an embarrassing ordeal. In this regard, Warager Ase Torgaard was a very disagreeable man, who, with remarkable bluntness, made clear to his royal colleagues his views on the administration of law and justice, on service and objectivity, and especially on the rights—and above all the duties—of the high royal state officials, to such a degree that the participants in these constitutionally mandated assemblies were, in their heart of hearts, always relieved if the meetings passed by without any particular incidents.

Given the vastness of the Atlantean empire, it was unavoidable that these sessions—provided enough topics for discussion had accumulated over the six years—would sometimes take place for a full fourteen consecutive days. And the old man, as the imperial king was called, half-jokingly and half-annoyedly, presided tirelessly over them, without showing any signs of fatigue, even though, at eighty-three years of age, he would have been entitled to. When the royal gentlemen from Gaatland, Gotburg, Harvesum, Acora-Brammerloh, Schoongard, Suderpoor, and Paardegatt yawned behind the leather-bound notebooks of their daily agenda so that the gold fillings in their teeth vied with the shimmering pillars of the Poseidon Hall, and when the kings of Lipore, Murnaad, and Antianyu wrote love letters to their young wives with attentive expressions—the one from Antianyu, incidentally, to a young lady of the court—the imperial king Warager Ase Torgaard would go on at length about constitutional questions in Gotburg and Lipore, about the culpable omission of annual reports, about the slow receipt of tax shares for the empire, and similar matters. The old man knew perfectly well that his royal colleagues were yawning or writing love letters, but for that very reason, he spared no one. All of them came, one after the other, before his sharp tongue.

The dreadful exercises in patience began shortly after sunrise, were interrupted by a long five-hour midday break, and were supposed to end an hour before sunset. But if the day's agenda had not been completed, each participant was given a fine golden candlestick with a burning candle placed before him on the precious table, and the ordeal stretched out to the grim delight of the

imperial king, until the bright stars of the Atlantean night sky sparkled above the Poseidon Hall, reminding everyone that the days were meant for work, but the nights were supposed to be for rest.

According to ancient custom, there was also no leniency regarding dress code during the sessions. The imperial king presided in full princely regalia, though he wore the imperial crown only on the first day to receive the guests. On the other days of the session, the jewel-encrusted diadem of the empire adorned his high forehead, and the state kings—who had kept these ornaments of their royal houses locked away in a chest for six years—had to have the pressure marks on their temples tended by wives and daughters from about the sixth day of sessions onward. Hagenot Skullorn of Acora-Brammerloh-Aargund had no wife for this purpose, so he wore a diadem of the thinnest gold sheet, which did not require the healing touch of a woman's hand, since it did not leave marks.

In addition to the kings, the highest officials of the High Sun Gate participated in the sessions; this year, almost all the governors and burgraves from the border provinces were present as well, along with their advisors and secretaries. The Poseidon Hall was spacious enough to accommodate more than two hundred gentlemen, but the tables were insufficient. The golden tables, which from ancient times had been reserved for the kings, were, in such cases, supplemented by wooden ones from the Allvater's domain. These were arranged in a wedge shape as several horseshoes extending from the golden cross-table of the kings' tables through the hall and disappeared between the mighty columns of the antechamber. The spaces between the columns were, for obvious reasons, very popular. Here sat mainly the constitutional scholars and high judicial officials of the realm, as well as the scribes of the imperial and state offices, the governors of the border provinces, and finally the duty officer of the Asgard with his lofty eagle helmet—undisputedly the most handsome member of the illustrious assembly, but for that very reason all the less influential.

Warager Torgaard sat before the law column of polished brass, which towered high above his golden, throne-like chair. This column dated from an almost unknown, ancient time and bore, in keywords, the basic features of the Asic constitution engraved upon it. One could only read this peculiar law book by tirelessly walking around the column, first bowing deeply to the ground and later craning one's neck to decipher the last, archaic characters beneath the ornate capital. Since the content of the inscription was generally known and already had to be memorized at school, such an attempt at reading was only made when the legal scholars, from the not always entirely clear wording of the column inscription, sought a basis for a new interpretation of the law.

To the right of the imperial king sat the heir apparent, Wittmund Ase Torgaard, the Acora, also on a throne-like chair, and to the left, in the same manner, the Papas of Urd, Lord Amenor Lochi. Next to them on both sides were

the state kings, and finally, following in rank and dignity, the male members of the royal houses and the other session participants.

Young warriors, fulfilling their service duty on Asgard, stood ready to supply the high lords with writing materials and, if desired, with fresh, cooled spring water; and finally, outside before the grand facade of the rectangular columned hall, a hundred Asgard warriors in gleaming brass, under their captain, waited with the equanimity of all soldiers for the sessions to end. The royal assemblies did not lack a certain solemnity and dignity, and even the most notorious wits among the high lords could not escape the deep impression that the splendor of the Poseidon Hall and the brilliance of the royal assembly involuntarily made upon them. Surrounded by jewel-studded statues, bathed in the sparkle of the finest treasures on ceilings and walls, on columns and pillars, a wild pride surely awakened in every participant in the sessions, to be a serving member of the first and most powerful federation of states on earth.

The sixth day of the royal assembly, according to the agenda, was devoted to a thorough discussion of the "Heldung measures," which had been worked out in the Imperial Office of War. When Burgrave Herbing Ase Kopping entered the Poseidon Hall in the morning, he placed a voluminous leather-bound volume on the table before him, and the officials from other imperial offices of the core government, who sat nearby, sighed deeply because the volume was so thick. The Acora and several state kings approached with looks of dismay to see whether the entire volume was indeed going to be read out. Although they had participated in at least ten preliminary meetings to establish the guidelines, they had not expected the volume—which contained only the detailed division of topics—to have become so extensive. Given these circumstances, it seemed more than likely that the discussions would last several days.

With quiet sorrow, the scholars of public and civil law noted that, under all circumstances, today's session would again last deep into the night, and that as a result, they would have to miss the captivating lecture of young Wieborg at the Imperial University. And today, the wild captain intended to speak about the developmental history of the foreign trade of the High Sun Gate, a topic that sounded so promising that one could already count on an eight-day house arrest for the relentless fighter in advance. It was downright uncanny and incomprehensible where Wieborg got his valuable sources. Chronologies reaching back thousands of years and names of Venerable Fathers, which one had barely learned in school even existed, were given with exact dates and years, with reigns and important official acts, without the High Sun Gate having so far raised any objections. The Venerable Father Amenor Lochi was even mentioned once with devoted respect, and the hope was expressed that, with his consent, the course of the High Sun Gate over the last fifty years might be presented in future lectures.

The corridors and lawns of the University for General Humanities had by now already become too cramped. Especially for the lectures on the history of the Nordic Empire of Atlantis, visitors from all walks of life crowded in as if they were about to receive a new revelation. The idea of a people's community based on Asiatic (Nordic) spiritual foundations had, above all, caught fire among the exceedingly numerous unrecognized citizens and workers of the city of Atlantis and the communities of the hinterland. The wish—the necessity—for a social restructuring had existed for centuries, and Baldur Wieborg, as fortune's favorite, had the advantage of being born in a time that was receptive to such trains of thought. For even among the unrecognized citizens of the empire, the Nordic strain of blood was so predominant that, at this time, one could still rightly speak of a unified community of Asiatic blood.

Even the high-born council members regretted having to miss the lecture. True, they were considerably annoyed at Wieborg, who wanted to overturn old, inherited customs, but since the High King had not yet taken a final rejecting stance, they cursed Baldur Wieborg in private—and otherwise longed eagerly for the evenings to hear the captivating speaker standing by torchlight.

Remarkable was the attention the army paid to the captain. As night fell, thick masses of leather tunics and round military caps thronged around the lectern, and to the dismay of the distinguished Spiritual Councils, it always smelled rather like it did at the great military exercises on the Idafield, when Warager Torgaard, on a snow-white horse, would review the endless lines of Atlantean centuries (units of a hundred) with their war chariots and elephant divisions, preparing for embarkation to relieve some border province.

The Poseidon Hall gradually filled.

Some burgraves from the provinces yawned, because they had been drinking late into the night. Their stay in the metropolis had to be taken advantage of, especially since their wives had stayed home due to the long journey. The state kings were under better domestic supervision. Their queens had almost all come along, unless impending happy family events had prevented it, for traveling between the Atlantean islands on their own splendid royal galleys was a pleasure and a recreation. Maritime travel in the motherland was so secure that any anxious warnings from husbands about the strains of such a journey were inevitably seen through.

The governor of Drudenmark, by the Anglo-Land inland sea, had already taken his seat behind a mighty pillar, laid his heavy head on both arms, and was asleep. The wine merchants in Atlantis held him in high esteem, as he was a major buyer of the native grape juice and yearly sent small shiploads of select wines to his misty northern province. Compassionate colleagues determined by surveying that the burgrave was sufficiently shielded from the

High King's view by his pillar, and left him to sleep. His neighbor, the scribe of the high governor, was assigned the task—not unfamiliar to him—of, at the first sign of snoring, striking his master in the back with a fist (not an open hand), aiming for the embroidery on the neck and not the leather of the tunic, in order to muffle the sound.

Punctually as always, when the sundial on the mighty gable of the columned forehall showed the eighth hour of the morning, the High King Warager Ase Torgaard appeared and opened the sixth session of the royal assembly.

Herr Herbing Ase Kopping was immediately given the floor for his report, and the gentlemen settled comfortably back in their chairs, for now it would be several hours, if not the whole day, before discussion would begin. The Burgrave spoke extemporaneously, glancing now and then at his leather-bound volume and occasionally drinking from a glass that contained water. Herr Kopping didn't care for it, but other refreshments were not allowed in the Poseidon Hall, and in a gathering of Northmen there was no need to explain why.

During the report, the king leaned over to his son, the Acora, who obediently inclined his ear to the stern father.

"Wieborg compiled what Kopping is reading," said Herr Warager quietly. "I recommend you keep Wieborg when I'm gone."

"He is a bit ruthless toward the Pforte and the state kings," replied the duke just as softly. "I fear there may be unrest in the high assembly today."

"Don't care about unrest," grumbled the old man. "Heldung measures aren't a trifle, but deadly serious."

After this short, subdued exchange between father and son, for another half hour, one heard nothing but the slowly hoarsening voice of old Burgrave Kopping.

"Pay close attention, Acora," said the High King quietly. "Here it comes. Your friend Amenor Lochi will be surprised."

The Papas of Urd was sitting on the other side of the High King and was making a vain effort to overhear the words the lord whispered to the crown prince.

Not only the Venerable Father pricked up his ears. The other gentlemen did too, as Herbing Ase Kopping continued:

"Alongside the ships of the homeland war fleet and those of the civil shipping companies (names of vessels and shipmasters follow), the High Sun Gate [Hohe Sonnenpforte] is also making available to the War Office, free of charge, for the evacuation of the populations of the low-lying islands of Gaatland, Schoongard, Harvesum, Suderpoor, and Paardegatt:

1. Six hundred large galleys, at least three hundred of which must be drawn from the coastal waters of Tiahusinyu and Zimbabuye.

2. The required crews of at least eight thousand experienced seamen, as well as the captains, helmsmen, and paymasters. — Does His Majesty the High King wish the names of the ships and captains to be read out now?" asked Herr Kopping.

"Thank you. Not necessary. A copy of the order for the Pforte is sufficient," replied Herr Warager contentedly, casting a questioning glance at his neighbor to the left. But Amenor Lochi kept his crowned head bowed and merely jotted down a few notes.

The unrest in the hall grew. Had they heard correctly? A copy of the order? And something like that for the Sun Gate, which was always asked, never ordered? A fine breeze was blowing in from the War Office. And then: six hundred large galleys! And this number was accepted in silence by the Venerable Father and his councilors, without a single indignant outcry! Truly, signs and wonders were taking place.

"'Free of charge,' the Burgrave had said. In truth, it should go without saying that, in the coming crisis of the Empire, the Pforte would make its resources available without charge. But who had ever received anything from the business-minded temple administration for free? How was it possible to know the resources of the High Sun Gate so precisely, that the head of the Imperial War Office was ready to recite the names of specific galleys and shipmasters? This knowledge bordered on magic.

Everywhere in the hall, one could observe what until now had only been seen between the High King and his heir: the leaning of upper bodies toward neighbors and a low murmuring, as though the Poseidon Hall was buzzing with bees who mistook the blazing gemstones for flowers. Occasionally, through the humming, a name could be clearly heard: Baldur Wieborg!

Warager Torgaard tapped softly but insistently with the diamond pommel of the imperial sword lying before him on the golden tabletop. The buzzing subsided, and the old Burgrave could continue his report. After the priests of the High Sun Gate appeared to have accepted the demand for six hundred ocean-going galleys without objection, the subsequent provisions— such as the requisitioning of the extensive accommodations in hermitages and

pilgrimage sites on the mountain heights of the Atlantic islands—no longer caused as much amazement among those present. The Imperial War Office had evidently already made contact with the High Sun Gate, so difficulties in the ensuing discussion were hardly to be expected. Since the lunch break preceded the debate, the gentlemen could still hold brief consultations, as there was always another opportunity for discussion after the communal meal in the residential halls of the Allvater's Estate.

Once again, the Poseidon Hall became completely silent, with only the hoarse voice of Burgrave Kopping monotonously echoing through the golden splendor of the room. A brief snore from the direction of the pillar hall was promptly stifled by a dull blow. The knowledgeable smiled, the High King craned his neck and grinned, a few gentlemen looked up in surprise, thought what they would, and wished they also had a seat behind a pillar.

A deep bell tone finally signaled the start of the lunch break. The high sun was already burning uncomfortably on the session participants in the open Poseidon Hall.

But the High King did not adjourn the session until Kopping had finished his report.

The governor of the druidic border march woke up and wanted to pay, but soon realized he was in the Poseidon Hall of the Asgard. He had slept well and was looking forward to the excellent cuisine of the royal house; the state kings lifted their oppressive diadems, and the spiritual councilors gathered up their memo-leathers with inscrutable expressions.

'Solid work that Wieborg has done,' the High King said, smiling amicably at the Papas of Urd.

Amenor Lochi affirmed this with a tone of deep conviction and remarked only that the young man ran the risk of forfeiting all his friendships if he continued, as before, to unsettle the Empire's unrecognized citizens with his unprecedented innovations. Especially the Duke, whose unyielding position on the racial question was well known, would have little joy from the young captain. And this, he said, was a reason that cast some doubt on Baldur Wieborg's prudence.

'I'll assign Wieborg to my son,' said Herr Warager Torgaard, with a sidelong, watchful glance at the spiritual ruler of the Empire."

"I can't see any advantage in such an assignment, Your Imperial Majesty," replied Amenor Lochi, somewhat disgruntled. He knew the old man well—if you contradicted him, you could be certain he would insist on having his way.

"I'll think about it," replied the King calmly.

"The Spiritual Councillor and Chamberlain of the High Sun Gate, Herr Odil Ase Gadirus, intends to raise an objection this afternoon to the recent statements made by the Captain at the College of General Humanities. Perhaps it would be advisable to postpone assigning him to the Duke's court for now," suggested the Papas of Urd.

"The Duke will shut him up soon enough," the High King declared plainly.

"I would favor transferring the young man to a border province," continued the Reverend Father with great persistence, but careful emphasis. "I admit that Wieborg is a remarkable mind, but it seems to me better that he clear his thoughts abroad. That's never done anyone harm. Under the circumstances, it might help him avoid serious trouble for himself."

"I can imagine the fellow doesn't suit you," replied the old man bluntly. "You're free to consult the Imperial Chief Legal Counsel if you wish. Chamberlain Gadirus could wrap up the matter quickly."

"Wouldn't that be the Empire's responsibility?" asked the priest, feigning injury. "In any case, the enforcement of civil criminal law isn't the business of the High Sun Gate."

The High King grinned broadly and maliciously.

"No desire, Lochi," he said curtly. "I know exactly what would get dragged up if I prosecuted Wieborg over the documents. We'd all have to duck before that young fellow. Why? Not for my sake. My uniform is clean. The Pforte's too? The Duke's too?—Don't know; don't want to know. Let's go to lunch."

The Papas of Urd gave a slight bow and couldn't quite conceal a small smile behind the old man's back. Things seemed to be developing favorably. He would have wagered his priestly crown against an old sailor's cap that Wieborg would be sitting with the Duke on the Asgard in a few days.

When the High King left the Posiden Hall, he called over the Asgardian, Adelger Ase Gaatland—who had taken Baldur's place—and instructed him to summon Captain Wieborg immediately to the Allvater's estate.

"Tell him to dress properly," said the old man. "I want him at my table for lunch."

At the midday table in the Allvater's estate, more than five hundred people were present, since even the relatives of princely families were entitled to such hospitality. Although the High King had no need to be frugal, he didn't care for ostentation at meals, but placed all the more importance on a richly laden table. The great banquet hall in the residential wing of the estate wasn't quite large enough to seat so many guests, so the folding doors to the knights' hall of the Acora residence had been removed, thus solving the difficult problem of accommodating everyone at the feast.

The invitation to the assistant from the War Office to dine at the royal table had been given rather last minute, so Baldur Wieborg arrived only after the banquet had already reached the second course, and the initial solemn silence had given way to cheerful laughter and animated conversation. Baldur appeared in a simple military tunic, with his bronze helmet under his arm, and made his way straight toward the High King, who—to the silent horror of the far more refined state kings—had tucked his napkin into the collar of his pearl-embroidered blue festive robe and was contentedly carving up an antelope loin. Baldur could barely suppress a laugh, because the hall became very quiet upon his entrance. Everyone seemed surprised that a mere captain could stride so confidently through the banquet hall of kings, wearing not a look of reverence but rather one of barely concealed amusement. The women and princesses of the state kings turned their more or less beautiful and youthful heads toward the well-known university lecturer with obvious approval, and the princess Armane almost cried out with delight, "Baldur!" Amenor Lochi, who was seated opposite the heir's daughter next to Herr Warager Torgaard, lowered his gaze with a satisfied smile. He had noticed the flash of joy in Armane's eyes. If the High King assigned Wieborg to the Duke at the Allvater's estate, the greatest danger to the Pforte would, in all likelihood, be averted.

Herr Warager was puzzled by the sudden lull in conversation and turned around questioningly. Now it became so quiet that one could hear the measured steps of the captain and the faint clinking of his sword belt. For a moment, the young assistant from the War Office did feel somewhat uneasy, but this weakness, so common when passing through a hall filled with the eyes of distinguished personages, was immediately overcome by the commanding will of the warrior.

"Come here, Baldur!" called the High King, setting aside knife and staff. Then he wiped his mouth on the hanging napkin and pushed his chair back.

Once again, the company was amazed. The lord called the captain simply "Baldur," just as his closest confidants did.

"Captain Wieborg reporting to the High King," announced Baldur Wieborg in a clear, bright voice that rang through the hall like a blaring trumpet.

One of the Spiritual Councilors of the High Sun Gate, whose nerves had become a bit frayed over time, brought both hands to his ears and made a pained face.

"I'm glad you're here," said the High King, offering the captain his soft, wrinkled hand. "Are you hungry, Baldur?"

"No, Your Majesty," replied Baldur Wieborg, looking at his royal sovereign seriously and calmly.

"Why not?" Herr Warager asked in surprise.

"Because I've just eaten," Baldur explained quickly.

"I often get it wrong with you," laughed the old man broadly.
"Should have invited you earlier."

"I can eat again," declared the captain.
"In the communal kitchen with the Asgardians, there were white beans."

"They're as dangerous as liquid blasting fire," grinned the old prince. "Sit down over there at the exit, Baldur. After all, you're only a poor captain. No need to check the order of precedence. I want to speak with you alone later in the blue cabin."

The blue cabin was the High King's own realm, the only room where he could rule as he pleased—something not entirely possible in Atlantis. After the death of the Empress, the blue cabin looked almost dreadful. There, Herr Warager Torgaard could ignore order and punctuality; he liked to take his midday rest on an old camp bed, and no one was allowed in the cabin except himself and an old servant, who was permitted to tidy up only the worst messes. To be received in the blue cabin was almost a special distinction, and Amenor Lochi took this into account, contorting his face into an annoyed laugh despite his inward satisfaction, with the intended effect that the old man was pleased.

"What has Baldur done, Grandfather?" asked Armane Acora quietly, leaning over the table toward the king.

"Serious criminal," replied Herr Warager, without letting the antelope loin distract him. "He'll be hanged."

The duchess laid her white hand on her daughter's arm, and Armane ducked her head and was silent. She was smart enough not to believe in any hanging, but since the whole city was talking about her Baldur, she feared for him.

The duke smiled to himself. The high lord father didn't know what had happened in Aargund, didn't realize that his son had made peace with Baldur Wieborg. Herr Warager thought that by obviously favoring the young captain he was annoying the heir, but Amenor Lochi, too, was shooting his gentle arrows in the wrong direction this time. True, the Acora didn't know his father's plans, but he would have sworn that later, in the blue cabin, Baldur Wieborg would be appointed field colonel and chamberlain in the service of the heir. That the High King hadn't asked his son beforehand was typical of the old man's unpredictable character. Chamberlain Wieborg was simply to be forced upon the less-favored son.

The Papas of Urd had played his part well, even if his intentions were different from those of the Acora. For the weeks in Aargund had brought the springlike Baldur his most important victories in a career of just a few fortunate years—namely, the heart and mind of the heir to the throne of the Atlantean Empire. The burned document, which had contained the hasty treaty with the High Sun Gate, had been extinguished and thus freed the Duke's back once more. Well-meant folly had lost its sting; the noose around his neck was broken, without Amenor Lochi knowing it. Whatever other weapons the Gate still held against the Acora did not weigh heavier than those which the Revered Father could use against so many other high officials of the realm. Now the Papas of Urd sat under the pressure he had been able to exert for so many years with all friendliness, and he was still under the impression that the treaty was a dangerous weapon in the hands of Captain Wieborg. The fact that this was not the case would only be revealed to the Revered Father when the right time came.

Meanwhile, the company at table had already forgiven young Wieborg, and laughter and chatter resumed as before. In this regard, the High King had a good quality. He loved unrestrained cheerfulness at his table, and could become very annoyed if his guests, worried about being spoken to, hardly touched their plates. The priests of the higher temple service were probably the only ones who didn't enjoy the king's table, for they were always at risk of being confronted with questions that were uncomfortable to answer before such a large company. Sometimes the High King's questions bordered on blasphemy, and one of the most difficult tasks for the Revered Father was to deflect the answers into a joke.

Baldur Wieborg sat at the lower end of the hall and wondered what the old man might want from him this time. In some ways, he felt a twinge of guilt, for he realized that Herr Warager Torgaard would one day cause trouble for his lectures on the community of Asiatic spirit. In matters of race, the High King was surely as unteachable as most of his royal colleagues and the other pure-blooded Aesir. The fact that the High Sun Gate drew its power precisely from the existence of millions of unrecognized citizens of mixed Asiatic blood was, of course, well known to the king, but he could always point to the previous successes of his rigid racial principle, and could describe the disadvantages that had developed over time as insignificant and, in an empire of millions, as

unavoidable. Whether the king would realize that it was high time to effect change here, and to rectify and prevent further racial decline through generous reforms, was unlikely given the stubbornness of the old man. But Baldur Wieborg, for his part, kept faith in his good fortune, and was even determined, when the opportunity arose, to catch Herr Warager Torgaard in his intellectual pincers. Had it not once seemed impossible to win over the Acora? And yet a few weeks in Aargund had sufficed to work this miracle. Baldur Wieborg, by the way, had little chance to dwell on such thoughts for long, as he sat at the far end of the table among the underage children of the royal families. The youngest Aesir were at first very quiet and eyed the new table guest surreptitiously and suspiciously from the side, but soon they became more trusting. Eventually, under Captain Wieborg's quietly told, cheerful stories, merry laughter broke out from time to time, so that the High King, with a good-natured grin, glanced toward the end of the table, where things were obviously livelier than near him.

"Anyone up here who's as childish as Wieborg can sit down there," he said contentedly.

"I, Grandfather!" Armane Torgaard immediately volunteered. Amenor Lochi smiled benevolently, the heir to the throne less so, and the Duchess said reproachfully:

"But Father!"

At this, Armane received a look so full of reproach and deep indignation that the young girl quickly took it back: "Actually, I'd rather stay here."

"Poor child," said the High King quietly, lowering his aquiline nose devoutly into the large goblet of golden-yellow Atlantean wine.

The next three hours of rest were devoted to the midday relaxation of the high guests—though, of course, only for those who wished to use them that way. The young people went out with the royal maidens and the daughters of high dignitaries into the park of Asgard and entertained themselves with childish games.

Baldur Wieborg, however, followed a servant into the living quarters of the Allvater's residence, which, despite his service as an Asgardase, were still not all familiar to him, since even the castle guards were not permitted in the inner rooms of the royal wing. The way led through long, winding corridors, until the servant, with bowed head and reverent mien, knocked at a fine wooden door behind which lay the famous blue "Kaje." Kaje was actually the term for living quarters on ships, perhaps due to their small size, but the name for the High King's favorite room was well chosen. The little chamber was hardly more than a small ship's cabin.

After a gruff "Come in!" Baldur stood stock-still in amazement at the disorder, so much so that his official report caught in his throat.

"You're surprised," said the High King, satisfied. "I can understand that. I know exactly what you're thinking, Baldur."

The captain remained silent. Warager Torgaard sprawled like a huge old bear, content with himself and the world, on a wild heap of blankets and cushions that loaded down the field bed made of plain bronze bars.

"I'll tell you what you're thinking," continued the king. "You're thinking: 'The old Warager is a messy, sloppy fellow, a real ragamuffin, just like those in the dockside taverns.'—Am I right?"

"No, High King," replied Wieborg.

"How then?" the old man probed suspiciously.

"I think something like that, but more politely, Your Majesty," replied Baldur Wieborg amiably.

"Well then, basically it's the same. I'm very glad that you're not lying. At any rate, you lie skillfully.—Or not?"

"I never lie, Your Majesty," Wieborg said calmly.

"Really? And how do you manage that?"

"I haven't needed lies so far, but I won't claim that I'll never need them in the future," explained the captain. "I don't know the future. In any case, I've discovered a secret, young as I am: to fight with the truth. Surprisingly, I've chalked up some rather fine successes."

"Even more arrogant than two years ago?" asked Warager.

"No, I've always been like that."

"How do you fight against the Gate? Also without lies?" the old man inquired, watching his guest intently.

"The High Sun Gate is my mortal enemy," replied Baldur Wieborg firmly. "Against it, I use every means I know: force, treachery, cunning, deception, and also lies, if I can use them."

“I see,” grumbled the king, sinking his head back into the cushions. Baldur was careful not to break the silence that now fell. The High King wanted something particular, and he should be the one to say it.

“You should try harder to win the Acora’s favor, Baldur,” Warager began after a while. “I’ve told you before.—But sit down somewhere, captain. Throw the leather bundles with young Grammer’s ballads off the chair, put them on the floor for all I care.—There. Actually, I’m tired; I’d like to sleep. King’s council at my age is exhausting.—Do you know how old I am?”

"Eighty-three solar years, Your Majesty," replied Baldur.

"Are you also counting the years until I’m dead?" asked Warager Torgaard with a sardonic tone.

"No, I can’t do that," the captain smiled, for he knew the High King couldn’t see this smile since his gaze was fixed on the wood-paneled ceiling.

"But you’re counting on it, like the others?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Wieborg answered shortly.

Warager Torgaard sat up and fixed his old, gray eyes on the bold young man who openly admitted he was counting on the king's death.

"There’s a special kind of flattery that takes pleasure in bluntness," he growled at his guest. "Think I’d like that, Baldur?—I don’t like it at all. I don’t know your heart, Baldur. Maybe you’re an honorable man, but the opposite is possible, even likely.—I know people, do you believe that?"

"No, Your Majesty," Wieborg replied, since he’d been asked.

"Reason?" snapped the old man, not expecting that answer.

"Because you doubt my honorable heart, Your Majesty," replied the captain with icy calm, which he instinctively showed to anyone who barked at him.

"I see, you’re angry with old Warager," sighed the High King, letting himself sink back into the cushions. "You’re sensitive. Probably an honorable man, that’s my opinion too.—You can rest easy, Baldur, it was all just teasing, what the old man said. I've had to deal with swine my whole long life. You can hardly imagine. Own son and heir—good-for-nothing..."

"I request to be dismissed," said Baldur calmly, standing up.

"I didn't ask you, Captain," the king snapped back.

"Sit down. Listen.—There are only some things I can discuss with you; you have a clean jacket. I know your kind well enough now. You know no fear. The break-in at Lochi's treasury was a game of life and death. I took note of it with respect. Lochi trembles before a little captain! You've won, Baldur; there's no doubt about that. Attack on the Gate—a solid achievement, you have my approval. The idea of a national community is foolish, but worth considering. Work on the Heldung measures is satisfactory. I can judge that. Will work better than if old Kopping had done it alone.—Do you want a promotion?"

"No, Your Majesty," Baldur replied indifferently.

"Reason?"

"A promotion might, under some circumstances, cost me my teaching position at the Academy for General Sciences," the captain answered clearly and confidently. "High government positions only interest me if I can use them to begin reforming the realm."

Once again, the king sat up and looked at his young guest with open mockery.

"Megalomaniac, Baldur?" he asked with a grin.

"To save the realm—yes, Your Majesty," replied Wieborg very amiably, regarding his grinning sovereign with an inscrutable expression.

"You started off very foolishly," laughed the old man. "You're fawning around old Warager Torgaard. That will delight the Acora terribly. You'll be surprised how quickly you'll be sidelined to some border province when I'm dead—unless, of course, a little poison dart finds its way into your back first. You should be fawning over the Duke, my boy. The Duke has the future, not me. You can't build a kingdom with old Warager anymore."

Baldur Wieborg remained silent and looked straight ahead. He was now facing an important decision. Should he tell the king the truth about his situation with the Acora? Should he mention that the Duke planned to take him along on his inspection tour of the border provinces, and that in Aargund, the strategy for persuading the king to make the assignment official had already been discussed? Baldur sensed how close he was to this goal. Warager Torgaard himself had expressed the wish that he should work more closely with the Acora. Whether this wish came from a sincere place was uncertain. If he were completely open and honest now, the unpredictable old man might just change his mind, if only to spite his son. The king had often shown such all-too-human traits.

"What are you thinking?" asked Warager Torgaard suspiciously.

"I'm wondering if it's in the best interest of the realm right now to tell Your Majesty the truth," Wieborg replied candidly.

"It's news to me that a little captain from one of my offices gets to decide what's in the best interest of the realm," laughed the old man, cheered. "I always thought that was the job of Warager Torgaard."

"I've earned the right to make decisions that concern the realm, at least for myself, by risking honor and life," the captain declared confidently.

"Does this decision also concern the Acora?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied Baldur.

"What happened in Aargund? Not exactly a joyride, was it?"

"On the contrary," Baldur Wieborg smiled. "Being sent to Aargund was at your command, Your Majesty. I obeyed, I went there, and I fawned over the Duke."

"Hard to imagine," remarked the old man. "Acora wants to be treated differently than Warager. — Success?"

"The Duke trusts me," said Baldur.

"And you?"

"I trust him as well, Your Majesty," said the captain with conviction.

"I'm glad that, for once, you'll get taken in, my boy," grinned the king, shooting a scornful glance at his guest. "Let me just warn you, Baldur—warn you against your own flesh and blood, as sad as it is. Acora is a devious man, he has dirt on his hands; sorry to have to say it. His way of life is… unpleasant. Duchess and the princess, I pity them. He's involved in some filthy secret cults."

"Perhaps he was forced into it," Baldur cautiously interjected, risking being rebuked for speaking unasked. But the king now seemed to take it for granted that Wieborg would share his opinion, so he replied quite animatedly:

"That's just what makes it so bad. Forced. Only a good-for-nothing who lacks a clean conscience allows himself to be forced. I'm deeply worried, Baldur. You can hardly imagine. People say I wish the Duke ill. Nonsense, of course. But I can't treat him well if he deceives me at every turn and secretly does dangerous things with the Pforte and their clique behind my back."

If only you knew what the ambassador's contract with the High Sun Gate looked like, Baldur Wieborg thought. The empire can thank its lucky star that the little captain from the war office, who really ought to be in prison for breaking and entering, managed as he did.

"I look to the future with worry, Baldur," Warager Torgaard continued. "The Empire stands on a hollow. One day, the Acora will be king only by the grace of the Papas. The Pforte has the masses, has the people. It lives off their stupidity, and lives well. It will be a small matter to drive us Asen out whenever the Pforte feels like it. Lochi, the poison-mixer, wears the crown like a born prince. — I had you locked up recently, Baldur. Why? I wanted to protect you from public prosecution. I preempted it with house arrest. They won't open their mouths against me. They'll wait till the old badger is dead."

"I'm still hoping for a public trial," said Baldur.

"Crazy!" laughed the king. "With their legal quibbling, they'll wring your neck."

"The imperial attorney will be careful," said Baldur, with victorious confidence. "The honor roll of the secret society of the All-Knowing Mountain Mother has gotten talkative. The chief attorney knows it too now. — It's good to be prepared for such dances; then a public trial is a pleasure."

"I don't understand," said the king breathlessly, as if he sensed what was coming. Baldur Wieborg continued:

"Odil Ase Gadirus, chamberlain of the Revered Father in Urd and spiritual counselor of the High Sun Gate, master of the Order of Noble and Free Spirits, master of the Secret Society of the All-Knowing Mountain Mother, member of the Free Bank of Universal Love of the Silent Stars..."

"Odil, that schemer from Agni?" asked the king quickly.

"Is my closest friend," replied the captain calmly. "It's not always necessary to break into vaults to get documents. Sometimes, friendship is enough."

"And?"

"Gadirus will attack me today in the royal council for blasphemy," added Baldur Wieborg. "But this will be dropped if, in the meantime, it becomes known that the king has put me—at the wish of the Revered Father of Urd—into a position that young men usually can't withstand: namely, close to the princess Armane Torgaard; either through reassignment or some other way."

"What is going on between you and my granddaughter?" the king pressed.

"I must ask to be allowed to refuse to answer that," said Baldur Wieborg, without any outward reaction.

The lord fell silent for a while, until a knock at the door interrupted the silence. The servant wanted to inform the king that the bell would soon sound for the beginning of the afternoon session. Warager Torgaard stood up, and the captain rose as well. Then the king did the same thing the Acora had done at Castle Aargund: he placed both hands on Baldur's shoulders and looked long into his gray, clear eyes. This time, no duchess interrupted the gesture.

"The matter with Armane must be endured," the king said slowly. "Love isn't so important. Loyalty is a hundred times more important. You may go to ruin from loyalty, Baldur. Now I know you. It seems to me, even that isn't all that important. The realm is a thousand times more important. I'll soon be leaving you all. — I'm leaving behind a good man for my Nordic people. The man's name is Baldur. Do you want to go to the Acora, Baldur?"

"No, Your Majesty," replied the captain.

"Then I will force you," replied Warager Torgaard sternly. "You no longer belong to yourself, Baldur. You belong to the people of Atlantis. I appoint you field marshal in my army. An external matter; you'll probably be indifferent to it. I assign you to the Acora. — It's necessary, Baldur. Not as chamberlain, as I first intended. That's too personal; it makes one unfree. — What do you want to become?"

"If it must be, clerk in the ducal administration," replied the captain.

"Clerk?" smiled the king. "Very, very modest, Baldur."

"The humble position makes my work easier, Your Majesty," Wieborg explained his request.

"Pen-pusher," the old man said thoughtfully. "But perhaps you're right, Baldur. — I'll send you the documents. — Clerk. So be it. Has a Nordic Ase ever striven after such a job title? — Here are your field marshal's cords. Put them on. When you walk by the Allfather's estate with those, the entire royal assembly will know what time it is. — This afternoon, the leaders of the realm's observatories will be present at the session. I'm curious whether Odil Gadirus's attack will fail to materialize."

"The spiritual counselor will remain silent," assured Baldur Wieborg.

The New Lord

Flashing shafts of light darted across the evening sky from signal station to signal station, tirelessly flitting across the globe, and wherever they crossed the boundary of night, the flashes of liquid fire sparkled from polished mirrors, carrying the news of mourning through the realm and its borderlands: that King Warager Ase Torgaard had died.

On the bridge of the war galley Hammersar, the signalman stood with his scribe and had him record the rune-signs of the sudden flashes that shot up over the western horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, originating from the customs galley Spurlaufer. This ship received its news—through the mediation of a great number of fire-ships—from the signal station Tafelland at the southern tip of the borderland Zimbabuye on the African mainland.

"End-of-message sign," said the ship's commander. "Relay further to the fleet of the Acora."

"Of King Wittmund Ase Torgaard," the signalman corrected, with a reminding look at his superior.

"Write the signal message in legible letters," replied the ship's captain. "I'll take it down to the King myself."

"We should also lower the flags to half-mast," reminded the signalman, wrote out the captured message in full, and swung the signal device half a turn toward the stern, so that with the last rays of the evening sun, he could relay the news of mourning to the now King Wittmund's slower-moving fleet.

Slowly, the imperial flag of blue cloth with the sun symbol was lowered to half-mast, the Acora's pennant at the stern disappeared and made way for the Torgaard family's house flag, waving at half-staff, and the off-duty crew gathered on the foredeck to quietly discuss the death of the aged ruler of Atlantis. With slow steps, the captain left the bridge, cast a glance at the tightly filled sails of the two slender, slightly aft-leaning masts, and made his way to the companionway of the ship's cabin, disappearing into its scrubbed wooden structure.

Beneath the bright sun-awning on the aft deck were two people who had noticed the flashes of the signal lights but paid them no mind—partly because this kind of communication was an everyday matter on a warship of the imperial fleet and, besides, couldn't be deciphered without a key; and partly because they had better things to do than read signals. The royal child Armane Torgaard sat in a woven wicker chair by the rail, at which Colonel Baldur Wieborg was leaning. To windward, Chamberlain Gunnar Ase Gepide had made

himself comfortable. He had suffered badly from seasickness in recent days and had now fallen asleep, since the war galley was pitching less today. The wheezing snores of the old knight sounded like the sighs of a relieved scapegoat, who had innocently borne the full torments of seasickness for all the older crew members of the "Hammersar" and now, in his own way, intended to sin by not keeping an eye on Lady Armane. The snoring did not sound very pleasant, but to Baldur and the royal maiden it seemed that Herr Gepide snored quite nicely; at any rate, both were satisfied with it and refrained from crossing from the lee side to windward to shake the sleeping man awake.

They did not speak much, the two young people who knew well that they belonged together and yet were certain that it could never be. True, they had sometimes spoken about how wonderful it would be if Armane were a farmer's daughter who could choose freely, like the other, happier sisters in Atlantis who were not born under a diadem. But the rare hours they were alone, the restraint Baldur Wieborg had to show precisely because of Lady Armane, had protected them both, so that from their youthful love there remained only a tender, melancholy remembrance. To be sure, they had both participated in the Acora's inspection voyage on the same ship, had ridden together in the entourage of the crown prince through the southern states of Zimbabuye, had both taken part in the festivities and receptions of the governors and district bailiffs, and had also been guests of black and brown African princes at hunts and conferences, but always Chamberlain Gunnar Gepide had been nearby. The Acora knew what was going on and wanted to protect both his daughter and Colonel Wieborg from bitter disappointment.

At the sources of the Nile, near the vast chain of lakes from which the river springs, the first signal messages had reported a serious illness of the old High King Warager Torgaard. The Acora immediately broke off his journey to Egypt and rode straight to the east coast of Africa, where the fleet, quickly notified, was waiting for the traveling party. The duke and his immediate entourage transferred from the heavy war galley "Mammut" to the fast-sailing "Hammersar" and hurried ahead of the fleet, hoping to arrive in Atlantis before the death of King Warager.

At Cape Tafelland, the southern tip of the great borderland Zimbabuye, the ship encountered a heavy southwest storm, which could be fully exploited for the northward voyage. The sturdy construction of the "Hammersar" allowed the masts to be over-rigged without issue; newly attached stays and shrouds braced the masts against the storm blowing from astern, so that the journey up to the latitude of the Atlantic island of Suderpoor proceeded with incredible speed. However, for those not seaworthy—such as Herr Gunnar Gepide—the twenty-eight days and nights during which the "Hammersar" plowed northward through green storm waves were a dreadful ordeal. For twenty-eight days and nights, the immense swells of the South Atlantic rolled beneath the "Hammersar," the

crowns of the waves tearing away from the sharp, curved bow with a piercing roar and racing ahead, as if the speed of the galley was nothing but a slow crawl.

Now, as the ship drew closer to the Equator and thus to the blessed isles of the realm of Atlantis, things had grown calmer. The strong southern wind was still pushing the vessel through the gradually flattening swell at great speed, but the deck had dried out again, the sun was shining warmly from the zenith, and the movements of the galley had become more even. Once again, one could stand at the railing and enjoy watching the sharks, which would occasionally glide beneath the keel with bluish bodies, never altering their course, as if the "Hammersar" did not even exist.

The sun was sinking in the west, nearing the surface of the sea. Astern, at the horizon, the tiny sail of one of the swift courier ships of the ducal fleet glowed in competition with the flashing signal lights; and while the young people silently watched this beautiful play of light, Baldur's gaze happened to fall on the Torgaard family flag fluttering halfway up the flagstaff at the stern. It had been raised to half-mast, replacing the duke's pennant without him noticing, and now signaled a profound, serious change in the life of Field Marshal Wieborg as well.

King Warager Torgaard, the old, stubborn northern knight, had closed his gray, suspicious eyes forever.

A shudder ran through the otherwise so fearless heart of Baldur Wieborg. With a fixed gaze, he stared at the fluttering cloth.

"Armane!" he said hoarsely, reaching out with his right hand to grasp the king's daughter's hand in need. For the first time in a long while, he called her simply Armane and forgot the formal "Frau" which had until now stood as a wall between the lovers.

"Baldur, what has happened?" asked the daughter of King Wittmund Torgaard. An icy fear shot through her as she saw fortune's favorite, as people called Baldur Wieborg, in a state of helpless, abrupt, and seemingly reasonless despair. "Baldur!"

A deep breath went through the tall knight's chest, his proud head slowly turned toward his beloved, and a distant, lost smile betrayed that his thoughts had wandered far away.

"King Warager is dead," Baldur Wieborg said quietly to the startled royal maiden. "Sit with me a while longer, Armane. I need you. We men are a strange people. All our self-assurance, all our pride, all our knowledge gives us support and purpose for endless years, and then it can happen to us, as it just did to me, that we reach out like lost little boys for a girl's gentle hand, as if her love

and tenderness could unravel the tangled knots of fate. As of today, your father is High King of the Blessed Isles of Atlantis. I have been preparing for this day, as a man must whose responsibility has grown year after year, who was drawn by fate into the grinding game of high statecraft. Your grandfather possessed a wisdom no one else in the realm knew. He was thought to be a stubborn old man with no inner fire—indeed, some even thought him malicious. He was not, Armane. He was so wise that he foresaw what I just recognized in horror, when I saw the Torgaard family flag at half-mast. He knew that I would break beneath the weight of my task."

"Must a poor king's daughter tell you that you're wrong?" Armane smiled bravely.

"That's not what I meant, dearest," Baldur Wieborg replied, regaining his composure. "I still hope to achieve my goal of reshaping the realm. Your father, King Wittmund, assures me that he will see it through even if I should die. No, something else will break the thread of my life—something that we Asen hold highest besides honor: loyalty. And my heart will be destroyed by loyalty, whether or not my body survives. Because, no matter what comes, they say one can go on living without love. Most people do, and are quite content. Perhaps your grandfather was right when he told me: Love is not important. The realm is a thousand times more important. You know, Armane, how strangely abrupt and fragmentary the old man's speech was. That manner of speaking had something immensely compelling. I have never forgotten a word he said to me."

"I won't ask if it pains you," the king's daughter said softly.

Baldur Wieborg took the slender hand of his beloved princess between his own and caressed her delicate fingers with a lost tenderness—the same fingers he had so often loved to kiss, especially now, when his heart was heavy.

"I'll tell you without being asked, Armane," he replied in a subdued voice. "I am haunted by the loyalty I owe, loyalty I owe a thousand times over. I am haunted by the crippled woman who, in service to the people of Atlantis, lost her health and youth—who, by sacrificing honor and life, gave me the chance to unlock the gates of happiness, the happiness of a great people. Such deeds demand loyalty from Wieborg. And I must carry that loyalty, even when it weighs so heavily. They say of me that I can do anything, and do it with a laughing mouth and shining eyes. They say Baldur Wieborg is spring incarnate, and that everything his hand touches bursts into bloom. But there is one I can no longer bring to bloom, Armane; one to whom I owe the success and fame of my life."

"Warga Gadirus," the princess replied softly.

"Yes, the gardener of the Sun Gardens in Urd," the Field Marshal nodded sadly. "Can love be acted out, as a good actor does? If your name is Wieborg, you must be able to, it's demanded of me. And I must play the part, must act it so masterfully that Lady Warga is deceived. You see, Armane, you can even use loyalty to commit a betrayal. And that is what's breaking me. It is impossible to remain an honorable man."

"Yes, that is what will destroy you, Baldur," the princess said firmly.

"Do you know better, Armane?" the colonel asked bitterly.

"No," answered Wittmund's daughter.

"For that 'no,' I will love you as long as I breathe!" Baldur Wieborg burst out passionately. But then he composed himself and continued: "Hold on, Wieborg! Do you know, princess, what I just wanted to do? I wanted to drop to my knees before you and lay my poor head in your lap. But who has ever seen the favored scribe of Acora do such a foolish thing? I have a strange longing, Armane—a longing said to belong only to the very old: the longing for peace. The old man once told me I should be careful not to have a poisoned arrow suddenly shot into my back. Maybe that merciful arrow will come, and when I feel its sting between my shoulders, I will think of Armane Torgaard and open my arms."

"And then I'll come into your arms, Baldur, even if I'm far from you," replied the princess, her eyes now moist.

The ship's bell greeted the sunset with four slow, solemn strokes. Quickly, twilight followed by night fell over the ship, and in the sky a glowing, misty disk appeared, shining in a white light, brighter than any other light in the heavens: the fateful wandering star Heldung.

Sir Gunnar Gepide felt the cool draft of the after wind, now that the sun was gone, and appeared, still a bit sleepy, on the leeward side to look for his princess. But when he saw the duke's scribe beside Armane, he was about to withdraw again, but Baldur Wieborg beckoned the chamberlain to come closer.

At the same moment, King Wittmund himself emerged from the companionway onto the deck, walking slowly to the sheltered spot under the awning. Baldur stepped forward to meet his new sovereign.

"Field Marshal Wieborg pays homage to High King Wittmund Ase Torgaard," he said quietly and solemnly. The eyes of the two men—who had become friends, even as many in Atlantis thought they were bitter enemies—rested on each other with trusting affection. The aging mouth of the new king twisted into a warm smile.

"And King Wittmund thanks his Count Wieborg," he replied with significant emphasis.

Baldur started. He knew the significance of that official title which Wittmund had just spoken. For centuries, it had scarcely ever been bestowed. Only saviors of the realm received it—no one else. And Imperial Counts were equal in rank to the Kings of the constituent states. Baldur knew what the king intended with this appointment. Titles of rank mattered as little to him as they did to his friend, even if it was the highest rank a king of the realm could bestow. No, this appointment was made for Armane's sake. The father wanted to unite the lovers without needing to violate the rigid regulations of the royal house.

"I ask to be allowed to decline the appointment for the time being," Baldur Wieborg requested softly. The king looked around. No one seemed to have understood his words.

"You are right, Baldur," he said with a sigh. "I was a bit hasty in my affection. What lies ahead of us is what I had prematurely anticipated: success against the Pforte and the Racial Office, the struggle for the laws we drafted together, the passage of the new tax legislation. — Good, Baldur, we'll wait."

"And we don't know what the star Heldung will bring us," the colonel said cautiously.

The king made a gesture as if he no longer feared danger from that direction. The "Heldung Measures" worked out by Wieborg were running like the gears of a finely crafted clock. The misfortune itself would have to be awaited in the mountains, and by the fleet out at sea. Wittmund Torgaard had not yet decided whether he would sail north with the homeland fleet or accompany the royal family to Castle Torgaard in the mountains to wait out the flood's retreat there.

"My confidence in your action plan, which has reached every office in the land and the realm, almost makes me forget the danger threatening us from the realm of Allfather," the prince said. "If you look due east, you can see how the War Office under old Kopping is taking hold. I count at least forty signal lights from galleys coming from Suderpoor, bringing the inhabitants of our southern island to Atlantis. Presumably, they are even Lochi's galleys. Just a few years ago, he put several hundred brand new ships into service, each able to carry over a thousand people. On the coasts of Zimbabuye, he used them to transport slaves; so, of course, the galleys couldn't be roomy enough then. Now, he's done us a great favor with his giant vessels. Old Kopping at least wrote to me, completely enraptured, that the Reverend Father of Urd is a pearl."

Baldur Wieborg smiled. He thought that, under the salutary pressure of a guilty conscience, even some good-for-nothings could become useful—aside from the fact that, for the purposes of the Heldung Measures, the hermitages actually contained valuable accommodations.

"Our lodging houses in the mountains will hopefully be ready in time," said the colonel then.

"My father has personally seen to that," replied King Wittmund. "So I suspect the question of housing the population will also be settled by the time we return to Atlantis."

Wittmund Torgaard did not speak of the death of the old high king. Baldur found this trait of his new master not bad at all. Why should he feign a sorrow before a friend that he did not feel? Too much mistrust and resentment had stood between the old lord and the Acora; the ever-recurring tragedy had erected its ramparts, which would never allow father and son to truly come together. True, it had been Baldur's careful wisdom that managed to steer the growing hatred between father and son into more bearable channels, but the residue of unforgiven bitterness remained—something only death could erase.

Gradually, the royal family assembled on deck along with the small court that had transferred to the "Hammersar." Wittmund Ase Torgaard accepted the condolences with the same somewhat contemptuous composure with which he had previously endured the homage as High King, with amiable equanimity. He declined the ship captain's offer to swear in the ship's crew and oarsmen, saying it should only happen in Atlantis after the entire fleet had arrived. A secure rule over an empire resting on foundations as broad as those of Atlantis had no need for a hasty oath of allegiance.

Baldur Wieborg spoke with the Queen, who once believed she could force her heart to resist her daughter's playmate, but now the king almost smiled to see with what warmth the queen returned the field marshal's words of congratulations, her beautiful blue eyes shining with the pale light of the wind lanterns swaying under the sail. Wittmund Torgaard slowly approached.

"I only wish to intrude for a moment," he said kindly. "I ask Baldur to come to the command cabin after dinner. We want to finish the message to the people of Atlantis—the one we prepared in Africa—tonight. If the wind doesn't die down, we'll reach Atlantis within five days by evening, and then it will be good to have the proclamation ready to sign."

After so many cloudy nights, the southern starry sky shone with magical clarity above the royal ship. The shimmering disc of the wandering star Heldung—which people, many millennia later, would come to call their earth-

moon—stood with a washed-out silver halo in the plain of darkness, where the wandering stars of the Solar Realm ran their fixed courses.

Whenever night fell at sea, this uncanny great star became the focal point for thousands upon thousands of sailors on all the world's oceans, for they all knew the warnings from the Imperial observatories that, twenty-four days after the vernal equinox, the celestial body would pass close to Earth. There were even predictions about the star's likely appearance, based on ancient records from millennia past. During the days of danger, the star was said to acquire a very foggy look and, possibly, like a comet, even develop a tail pointing away from the sun. That's why all those aboard the galley who were off-duty, or who belonged to King Wittmund's court, lounged contentedly by the starboard rail and gazed at the marvel in the sky with mixed feelings. Jesters among the sailors claimed they could already see the tail, but even they were uneasy at the thought that the effects of this close approach would be many times stronger than fifty years before.

That this time things were truly serious was shown by the many swaying navigation lights betraying, with barely perceptible movement, the merchant ships conscripted by the realm, sailing in the distance. They were on almost the same course as the "Hammersar," and at dawn would be joined by galley fleets carrying human cargo from the island of Paardegatt. And not just human cargo from there, but also valuable breeding horses that should not be left to perish in the disaster. Their destination, like that of the people, was the port of Atlantis, whose enormous ramps and mole installations, hoisting gear, and railways could provide secure berthing for hundreds of great sea vessels. The entire war and merchant fleet of the realm would have needed to be twice as large to fully utilize the harbor facilities in the ring and spur canals.

For the further transportation of people and animals, household goods, and foodstuffs, the broad training grounds of the imperial army on the Idafield stood ready, where endless columns of wagons waited to carry the unwilling mountain migrants up into the highlands. There, the royal house had prepared the estates and castles of the Allfather's fiefdoms to receive hundreds of thousands, had hired entire armies of carpenters from all ten kingdoms for a full year to erect whole cities of barracks, and the pilgrim houses of the former hermitages had been standing empty for weeks, awaiting guests from Suderpoor, Gaatland, Paardegatt, and Schoongard. Even the High Sun Gate, realizing it could not stand aside in the vast rescue operation, had cleared large tracts of its beautiful forests to obtain timber for new shelters.

That the accommodation of people would still occur in extremely cramped conditions was not considered too serious, for it was hoped that the days would be bearable during the period of danger, so that only the nights would require the huts to be fully occupied. It was not appropriate for the involuntary guests to remain outdoors at night, due to the cold in the highlands.

Even though the shelters were set up below the snow line, the nights would nonetheless become uncomfortably cold.

The issue of food supply proved to be very difficult. Calculations by the war office yielded such enormous figures that the departing population was required to bring enough provisions for their families for at least four weeks. Since, with a main danger period of five to six days, a stay of at least eight weeks was anticipated, providing food was a heavy burden for those organizing the Heldung measures. Hardtack was baked for twice that duration, and for this purpose, even the bakeries of the border provinces worked, sending entire shiploads of their zwieback to Atlantis. How the return of so many people would be managed was still unclear in the lower offices of Asgard. No one could know how the cargo fleets would withstand the high flood, whether they could be in Atlantis in time after the danger had passed, and above all, in what condition. After weeks of consultations with the heads of the imperial solar observatories, the fleet command had decided to send the ships during the danger period into the Middle Sea, with orders to avoid the coasts there under any circumstances. For the implementation of all these measures, martial law had been declared, and everyone knew what that meant: obedience or death.

For the first time in a very long while, the people of Atlantis realized once again that they possessed a strong central government, whose tenacious will could strike like lightning from Asgard wherever resistance appeared.

Baldur Wieborg leaned between Armane Torgaard and the Empress at the rail, gazing at the blazing star that, one day—after many future passes by the Earth—would have to give up its independent status as a wandering star, to circle as a moon around humanity's home. The possibility of such an event was well understood by the astronomers of Atlantis; at the solar observatories, the scholars looked upon the baleful celestial body with even greater concern than the crews of the ships did from the railings of their galleys.

The science of the stars was so highly developed in the Empire of Atlantis, and the observation of the movements of all celestial bodies visible to the naked eye had, through thousands of years of scrutiny and continual re-examination, been brought to an accuracy of results that would hardly ever be matched again. Thus, it was known with certainty that in the case of Heldung, it concerned a wandering star (planet), whose orbit almost exactly matched that of the Earth. Although no proofs could be given regarding the nature of the stars, the astronomers generally agreed that these wandering stars must be world-bodies, which in form and structure might resemble the Earth, even if they differed from it in mass and size. The effect of gravity, which such celestial bodies exerted on each other, was also known, although the true nature of this force was not understood. For the observation of the facts, however, it sufficed to know that the effect existed.

Since the observations of the star Heldung had been conducted with the greatest accuracy for thousands of years, it was also known that the orbital period of the small star around the sun had shortened, that the star evidently required a few hours less with each passing millennium to circle the sun. It was rightly concluded that this meant the star Heldung was drawing closer to the sun, and thus inevitably also to the Earth. Consequently, the astronomers at the solar observatories suspected that the time could not be far off when, in some form, a collision or a union between the two wandering stars, Heldung and Earth, must occur. In what forms this would happen, one could only shudder to imagine. The close approaches of the two celestial bodies in recent tens of thousands of years had from time to time given a taste of what must happen when little Heldung would no longer be able to escape the gravitational pull of the much larger Earth, as it had thus far always managed to do after a few days of emergency and terror. That even the transmitter of the Atlantis story, Plato, was aware of the causes of temporary floods and volcanic disasters on Earth is shown by a remark in which he ascribes the blame to altered movements of celestial bodies.

The possibility of the union of the two stars, this gravest concern of the astronomers, was kept secret in agreement with the governments of the Empire and the individual states, and this in full, clear awareness that in the worst case, every human attempt at rescue would be futile. Indeed, the measures referred to by the Empire simply as "Heldung" already intervened disastrously in the fabric of the giant empire, bringing trade and shipping, administration and education almost to a standstill for a period of over a year. While the fabulous wealth of the confederation of states, combined with the resources of the High Solar Gate, allowed for such a drastic cure to be undertaken upon the body politic, the higher government offices were well aware that, once the danger had passed, a heap of ruins would have to be cleared away, the likes of which calculating reason could hardly imagine.

In the border provinces, dangerous uprisings were also to be expected, since the subjugated foreign princes were merely waiting to strike as soon as the Empire encountered difficulties. So, when the governors of the border provinces left the royal assembly with the certainty that their military camps would receive significant reinforcements within a few months, when certain governors returned to their provinces with orders to arrest unreliable foreign allies without giving reasons—or, if that was not possible, to preemptively begin hostilities—even then they still bore the heavy burden of uncertainty about how the motherland, Atlantis, would survive the calamity. They knew that back home, a populace that had come of age was grumbling and knocking insistently at the gates of the Asic administration. Only a few trained military units remained in Atlantis. As a matter of duty, the Empire had sent all available combat forces to the border provinces. More than one king of the states, more than one governor and reeve, anxiously wondered what would happen if the “Heldung measures” failed—if it turned out that the ancient, powerful imperial administration was not up to its task.

After the royal family's communal dinner, at which Baldur Wieborg was, as usual, present, Wittmund Ase Torgaard withdrew with his scribe Baldur to his tiny work-cabin, which had been vacated for him by the ship's captain. The "Hammersar" was a war galley and did not possess any special rooms for royal guests.

"Take a seat, Baldur," said the High King. "We have much to discuss before our landing in Atlantis. When you presented me, in our camp at the sources of the Nile, with the draft for the royal proclamation, I was doubtful as to whether I should delete from the decree your recommended announcement of admitting twenty million citizens into the ranks of the recognized Asen. Now, having witnessed the effects of the 'Heldung measures' with my own eyes, now that I've realized that success would have been impossible without the energetic cooperation of the Atlantean states, communities, and great cities, I know that we must willingly give what might otherwise be forcibly taken from us."

"It is our good fortune that we recognized the times," replied the field marshal. "The energetic cooperation of the population proves how solid the confederation is, when it is reformed in good time. The transformation began when High King Warager granted me permission to publicly discuss such unheard-of things at a national university. Since my teaching license was not revoked, it was rightly assumed that the ideas I presented had the High King's approval. Thus, hopes were raised that we must not disappoint. The population is uncertain—very uncertain—in its judgment of your character, Your Majesty. Your close connection with the High Sun Gate is well known; even the Reverend Father seems not yet to suspect what changes have occurred in the meantime. Amenor Lochi is still of the opinion that I hold a weapon in my hand with which to strangle you."

"And instead you've strangled not my neck, but my heart," smiled the High King. "And the strangling was so gentle and cautious that now, after all, I am in your hand, even though you no longer have any weapons with which to force me."

"The new way of fighting has borne fruit, Your Majesty," laughed Baldur Wieborg happily. "Who, since time immemorial in Atlantis, has fought with the weapons of truth and honor? Now I almost feel like a devious, wicked dwarf who uses utterly illegitimate and malicious means to reach his goals. The High Sun Gate evidently considers such a way of fighting so impossible that it never occurs to them that a man with even half a sound mind could divest himself of all protection in dealing with you, could attempt it with honesty and honor—those two outdated concepts, which up until now only held some value among the common people, and maybe a few stubborn Asen, whom one could only laugh at for that reason. Your royal proclamation will make the temple administration prick up its ears."

"I fear so as well," replied Wittmund. "Even if the announcements in the proclamation that directly concern the High Sun Gate are still missing, we must reckon with the Reverend Father becoming alert. We are, in one stroke, robbing him of the immovable source from which he drew his power: the masses of citizens from all the islands in the motherland. I fear he will sense that the expansion of the Asic land rights to his estates in Atlantis—and then to the secured border provinces as well—will occur. That means, for the Gate, the loss of its worldly power."

"We can bear it, if at first it's only a matter of alertness," smiled Wieborg. "It will become more dangerous for you, Your Majesty. The unavoidable disorder during the passing of the star Heldung will give the High Sun Gate a welcome opportunity to employ its tried-and-true methods of timely deaths—even against the High King."

"Not against you as well?" asked the prince.

Baldur Wieborg laughed at his royal friend with shining gray eyes.

"I've expected that ever since I broke into the Reverend Father's treasury vault," he said, as if it were a very amusing matter. "The protection I've so far possessed in those documents will lose its effect when the conflict between the Empire and the Gate comes into the open, but I'll defend myself as best I can. And if the Papa of Urd now gets me with poison or a dagger, it wouldn't do him much good anymore. He's clever enough to know that. The draft laws are finished and only wait for your signature. You've already decided on the taxation of the High Sun Gate. The ban on secret societies—or the requirement that their statutes be made public—has also been set. The official clarification regarding the falsification of our Asic sun cult is prepared; it can be presented from the university lecterns in much the same way as I have tried to do. We have also worked out, together, the extension of Asic land rights to the Gate's properties in a draft law. If we bring in a few legal scholars in Atlantis, nothing stands in the way of publication. The star Heldung has actually grown dear to my heart, Your Majesty. It has granted us access to nearly all the retreats of the High Sun Gate, and I don't believe the War Office will loosen its heavy grip anytime soon. After all, Herr Kopping was the first to become fond of me, and in the end, he almost hated me for it—because he was forced to work and think. Not the way I wanted, but as he had to, as an honorable Ase, out of an inner compulsion, because he recognized the truth."

"Haven't you forced us all a little, Baldur?" asked the High King kindly.

"Never," replied the field marshal with conviction. "My 'force' was spirit, honor, love, conviction—concepts that have nothing whatsoever to do

with the force of violence or threats. You know very well there was another path open to me, Your Majesty."

"You tore it up and burned it," Herr Wittmund nodded thoughtfully. "When I think it over, I have to agree with you. All went with you willingly: Warga Gadirus, Odil, the teachers and students of the universities, the army, the workers who listened to you in Atlantis, then old Kopping, my father, finally myself—and not least, the queen."

"And the very first was Lady Armane," said Baldur Wieborg with a quiet smile.

"How do things stand between you two?"

"The noble lady knows that I will ask Frau Warga Gadirus to become my wife," replied the field marshal calmly. "Frau Warga is a recognized Asin. People will take it as a seal of honesty if the pure-blooded northerner Wieborg marries a recognized citizen of Atlantis. With Frau Warga I share a bond that cannot be broken. Loyalty for loyalty, Your Majesty. She walks the same path that I have traveled so far; you know it has been a good one."

"Frau Warga is paralyzed," said Herr Wittmund Torgaard, hiding a shudder.

"People say that whatever Baldur touches, it flourishes," his friend smiled, forcing it a little. "So it shall be with Frau Warga. She will recover."

"And the hatred of the Reverend of Urd?"

"I can only protect Frau Warga from that hatred by standing before her myself," replied Baldur. "Even before the proclamation of your first message, Warga Gadirus must be removed from the vengeful grasp of the High Sun Gate. The same goes for my friend Odil, the chamberlain of Urd, who for my sake had to accept every honorary office the Reverend Father could bestow. I am amazed he hasn't been broken by it. But your message will raise him up, if ever he was bowed. It also fulfills his longing, which is the thought of millions: to create a block of the people's granite as the foundation of the empire—not a block of crystal-pure race anymore; that the guilt of the fathers has prevented—but a block of the most precious folkish good, with the treasures of the Nordic soul as a vital inheritance. May those who come after us prevent decline from continuing. We have done our part."

"Perhaps one day people will speak of Baldur Wieborg as the hero who brought a new spring to Atlantis," said Herr Wittmund seriously.

"What will they say about me, Your Majesty?" Baldur asked slowly and thoughtfully. "I hope they don't say too much. It will be enough if they know that once there was a man who fought against darkness with the weapon of light—and even won victories with it."

"We are not at the goal yet, Baldur."

"I always believe in victory. That has been the secret of my successes, and so it shall remain," laughed the colonel.

"And you pulled me along with you," said the king, reaching out his hand to his friend across the swaying, narrow table. For a while it was quiet in the work-cabin of the Hammersar. One could hear the waves rushing and gurgling against the galley's planks.

"May I now read aloud the wording of the proclamation once more?" the field marshal asked matter-of-factly.

"Please do," replied the High King.

The Heroic Ordeal

"Please give me the last blink-messages for His Majesty the High King," said Baldur Wieborg to the old Castellan Herbing Ase Kopping, who—together with the other Imperial offices—had moved into Castle Torgaard, the highest of the royal family's Allvater Estates in the mountains.

"The last ones?" asked the old knight with a desperate smile. "The last came two days ago, from Suderpoor. The lighthouse watchman blinked us a mangled dispatch—forced over every conceivable detour because of the cloud cover—stating that the island had vanished beneath the rising sea. The tower had been damaged by earthquakes and was on the verge of collapse. Presumably the brave official was taken aboard the Falcon's Claw in time. At least, I hope so."

"So nothing else?" asked Wieborg gravely.

"Nothing," replied the castellan.

"No wonder," said the field-marshal calmly. "In storm and overcast weather even the blink-stations fail. We'll have to accept that and wait out the hard days ahead. We knew they would be no unmixed joy."

A thunderous shock of earth rolled beneath the men's feet as they sat in the granite-vaulted halls of the ancient royal fortress in Atlantis's highlands. Though it was midsummer, the men had to light candles over their plans, for the racing storm-clouds dimmed the sun; twilight hung over the once-radiant forests and meadows so that even the birds lost their sense of time and hid themselves, thinking night had come.

The hall was filled with people; the imperial offices had been reinforced with new officials, but that only meant less space for each. Even Lord Kopping could no longer claim a private workroom.

Inside the colossal walls came an eerie crackling. The powers of the deep showed little respect for whether the stone was five or ten feet thick—they shook it as though it were parchment.

"Then give me at least that one report, so I don't go to the High King empty-handed," Wieborg said evenly, though his eyes swept the creaking beams overhead. "And I'd like the latest water-level bulletin from Atlantis."

An assistant rummaged among a heap of thin leather sheets and handed one to the castellan.

"Here," said the old man. "Also from yesterday evening—the report for today hasn't arrived yet. The water stands three hundred feet above Asgard. Quite a bit of water. Three hundred feet—and it's still rising, after receding a little at noon yesterday. Meanwhile there's such a surf along the coast that no ship dares approach. If this keeps up, we'll drown here in the mountains."

"There's nothing from the imperial fleet, of course?" asked Baldur matter-of-factly.

"Nothing," answered the castellan, resting his white head in his hollow hand. "It's a dreadful feeling when the administrative network fails. You feel like some prehistoric man, living from one day to the next."

"The main thing is—he still thinks," the colonel laughed.

"When this filthy business is over—if it ends without all of us losing our hides—I'll recommend you to head my fine department," growled Lord Kopping. "I've no desire to piece this heap of ruins called an Empire back together again. When I imagine what our states will look like once the waters, in their goodness, choose to withdraw, my white hair could turn blond again—for it can't get any whiter. You might at least have helped me in this damned time, Wieborg. But when the real work began, my old assistant was gone—had to ride off with the Acora, with His Majesty the High King, to Zimbabuye, while the work burned under my nails."

"Whoever can master the work alone needs no help," said Colonel Wieborg good-naturedly. "Besides, you didn't really want me anymore, Lord Burgrave. — And your office? I hardly think the High King will remove from the successful director of the Heroic Ordeal measures the most important bureau in Atlantis, even if you were to ask him to. It isn't credible that the execution of the directives decreed by the King's Assembly should show signs of senile weakness — up to now we've seen quite the opposite."

"Then I may have to ask you for something," muttered the white-haired old man with a trace of bitterness. "Baldur Wieborg — the new star that outshines even the Heroic Ordeal itself."

"New stars fade quickly — in heaven as among men," the Colonel smiled.

"I know that," replied the Burgrave. "That's why I set a pack of my best security men on your trail the very day the Hammersar docked at the Asgard."

"So there's still a trace of affection for your former assistant?" asked Baldur with a faint laugh, leaning down toward his old superior. Herr Kopping irritably shrugged his broad shoulders.

"No illusions, Baldur," he grumbled. "I look after the safety of all whom I believe threatened. That has nothing to do with affection."

"Of course not," said Baldur softly. "The Lord Burgrave is always on duty — so from his heart, even with the best will, nothing can be discerned."

"I've work to do now, Baldur," answered Herr Kopping curtly. "If you need any official information, say so."

"That was all, Lord Burgrave," replied the Colonel, bowing respectfully to the old warrior before departing.

The corridors of Castle Torgaard were packed with people waiting to be admitted to the War Office. City wardens from Gaatland and Schoongard, horse-breeders from Paardegatt and from the lowlands of Antianyu came to complain about inadequate housing or to ask for fodder; wealthy ship-owners demanded to speak with the Burgrave to obtain official word on the fate of their galleys; weeping mothers wished to learn into which camp their husbands or children had been sent. During disembarkation they had still been together, but later the ship-stewards and convoy-captains had divided the groups destined for the mountains — and then they had been lost to one another.

And all of them wanted to speak with Herr Kopping himself.

"Poor Burgrave," thought Baldur Wieborg as he pushed through the crowds. Most of those from the flooded, abandoned islands didn't know him, but a few — city wardens and officials who had once heard him lecture in the halls of the Academy for General Sciences when on duty in Atlantis — recognized him and removed their caps. When Wieborg reached the two guards before the royal family's quarters, word spread swiftly of who he was: the great Colonel Baldur Wieborg, the man who had demanded equality between the Atlantean citizens and the Asen, now first counselor to the High King.

Behind him Baldur heard the muffled cries of women. Once again a tremor ran through the granite body of Castle Torgaard. The predictions of the royal observatories were coming true precisely. The population had been informed of them for over a year by public notice and oral proclamation, then reminded again at intervals. Along with the flooding of the low islands and valleys of the mountain states would come earthquakes and eruptions of old and new volcanoes. Yet knowledge alone could not banish present fear: dread hung heavy in the lodgings of the unwilling evacuees. In the highlands the storms raged with unnatural fury, the wind howled about the old walls of Torgaard so

that the slate shingles rattled and the trees of the park bowed their roaring crowns to the earth.

The vast courtyard teemed with armed men and saddled horses. Through the yawning gate — its portcullis and bronze doors standing open — traffic surged without pause. A small troop of riders pushed into the yard; a carrying-chair was borne in and set down amid the throng. With a soldier's help a captive man, hands bound, dismounted from his horse.

Baldur Wieborg smiled. There were his friends at last — safely brought from Urd and Agni. Leaning from the window, he tried to hail the detachment leader, but without success; so the Colonel dashed down the steep stairway and forced his way through the crowd to the newly arrived troop.

"The clerical councillor Odil Ase Gadirus and his sister Lady Warga — delivered as prisoners to Torgaard," reported the officer when he recognized the High King's secretary.

"Did the prisoners resist?" Baldur asked sharply, his voice intentionally loud.

"No, Lord Field-Colonel," replied the soldier. "Some of the priests of the Reverend Father protested. They were visiting the Lord Chamberlain in Agni to observe the rising of the waters over Atlantis. I pointed to the written order of His Majesty the High King, which I showed them. That was enough; we departed with the prisoners without any trouble."

"Bring the prisoners under strict guard before the High King," ordered Wieborg curtly. "Lady Warga Gadirus must be carried up by two steady men. I ask that it be done with the greatest care. — What is the water level in Atlantis?"

A wide circle of people pressed in around them. Everyone had asked the same question a hundred times a day, without ever receiving an answer.

"This morning the water had fallen, and quite considerably," said the officer, "but toward mid-day it began to rise again — higher than before. When I left, it stood a little over four hundred feet above the Asgard. I have the numbers from the observation post established by the War Office. The level can be read precisely: the clerks marked soundings on the cliffs of Urd, and the numerals on those markings are so large that one can see them even from the military road. The last figure I read, as I entered the mountains with the prisoners, was four-hundred-twenty. Over Atlantis the sun was shining — though only for a brief while — and it was an uncanny sight. Where the city and the Asgard once stood is now the sea. One can hardly grasp it. It all looks as though it could never have been otherwise. Out at sea a merchantman was still beating about; its captain

must have been asleep when the warnings were issued. What became of it I don't know — thick clouds closed around it."

"He'll have the sense to stand off into deep water," said Baldur Wieborg. "If he's lucky, his crew will escape with nothing worse than a few weeks of heavy seasickness."

The prisoners had already disappeared into the fortress. The Colonel pushed on to the stables where the High King's horses and those of the Third Asgard Hundred were kept. Captain Adelger Ase Gaatland sat on a heap of straw, eating a hunk of bread handsomely garnished with slices of sausage.

"Stay where you are, Gaatland," said Wieborg kindly. "I only want to see that the horses for the King and his escort are saddled."

"All in order, my Lord Colonel," answered the sword-captain, though he hastily pulled the eagle-crested helmet over his blond head.

"Thank you." — The Colonel was gone; the helmet flew back into the straw.

Outside, a whipping, icy rain struck Baldur's face as he stepped once more into the open. The soldiers crowded under the gate-arch and along the roofed galleries of the outer wall; only the poor horses stood in the courtyard with drooping heads, resigned to fate, letting the unfriendly water stream over their backs and harness.

"A proper soldier calls this sort of thing a swinish business," Baldur thought as he re-entered the castle, brushing the raindrops from his leather tunic. "Most people had imagined the passing of the Heroic Ordeal would take place in bright sunshine. Perhaps it's just as well the flaming mountain-fires can't be seen — it would only heighten the panic."

In the corridors of the royal wing, the guards lay on straw; the air smelled of sweat and wet leather. Along the walls leaned their long spears, bronze points resting on the wooden floor, already roughened and splintered in spots. Wherever soldiers come, the finest floors soon look dreadful.

Baldur took hold of a sentry who sat among a pile of stacked, swaying bronze shields, mending a shirt with such care that it was a wonder he ever found the right stitch, and said he was to announce him to the High King.

"I'll buckle my belt straightaway, my Lord Field-Colonel," said the young man — discipline was firm.

A short while later, Baldur Wieborg stood before High King Wittmund Ase Torgaard.

The Colonel delivered the reports from the War Office and stated that the prisoners had been brought in without incident.

"I'll see them tonight, when we return from our ride to the barrack camps," said the King. "Perhaps you'll undertake to greet them in my name when they arrive. Then I'd like you to ride out with me."

"I'll be ready shortly, Your Majesty," replied Wieborg. "But I ask permission first to deliver the draft of the new tax ordinance to the Office for Public Law. I must give the gentlemen a few words of explanation — the draft is written only in keywords. I was somewhat uncertain about it, having dealt little with such matters until now."

"Already finished?" laughed the King.

"I used the night for it," said the Field-Colonel. "The oxen penned beneath my window bellowed from evening until morning — there was no thinking of sleep."

"Then come for me when you're ready, Baldur," said Wittmund with a weary smile. "We've had things so easy for so long that it's almost refreshing to realize how different they can be. Still, I never imagined that as High King of Atlantis I'd be tripping over freshly greased soldiers' boots every time I stepped out of my chamber."

"This morning," laughed Baldur cheerfully, "I stepped straight into a pot of hot soup, stumbling through the dark hallway among snoring men. The master sergeant of the Third Asgard Hundred had grown hungry in the night and had the soup brought from the war kitchen. I only hope he didn't notice—there was still some left in the pot."

"Baldur, Baldur!" sighed the High King. "My father was right when he called you a child's head."

"One can govern a state even with a child's head," replied the Field-Colonel. "The bitter morsels taste better when one's allowed to laugh over them."

A sharp, jolting shock tore through the castle. The walls seemed to lean and then snap back upright. In the corridors, spears clattered and crashed to the floor, and the bronze shields fell with their owner—the man mending his shirt—who punctuated the racket with a hearty curse. Wittmund Torgaard turned pale, and Baldur instinctively hunched his shoulders. It was already the seventh

tremor that day. If it continued like this, serious damage to the fortress was inevitable.

"The carpenters are building a wooden barrack for the royal family on the meadow below the park," said Baldur. "But I would still advise that the household move before evening into the timber barns of the Torgaard estate offices. The new barracks won't be ready until tomorrow night."

"And the royal offices?" asked the prince uneasily.

"For the time being they can stay in the vaulted ground floor," said Baldur. "If it gets worse, they'll have to move into the cow and horse stables. Not dignified, but better than under a collapsing ceiling."

Baldur's meeting with Warga and Odil Gadirus was brief. The prisoners had been placed under the care of Armane Torgaard. Warga was to remain there, while her brother — the astronomer of the Agni observatory — was to move into Baldur's quarters. For a time the High King's friend sat with the allies of his struggle against the High Sun Gate. The siblings knew why the King, on Baldur's advice, had ordered their arrest: the Reverend Father might still be deceived for a while before he realized what bitter enemies had surrounded him.

"You'll be moved later into a barn," said Wieborg quickly. "The danger of quakes makes the castle walls too risky. I must still go to the Office of Law, and then fetch the High King — we're to visit several barrack camps. I hope we'll see each other this evening, though it's uncertain. We never know what the next hour will bring."

He kissed the ladies' hands, took Odil Gadirus by the arm, and led him away to show him the room they were to share for the time being.

The fair gardener of Urd sat among pillows that Armane Torgaard had arranged beneath her back and arms. Her face was pale and narrow, her proud blue eyes gazing into the distance, as though even the clouds could not bar her sight. Her paralyzed limbs still refused to obey her. For five full years, the young woman had suffered from the dreadful effects of the poison administered by the treasurer and adjutant of the Reverend Father — meant to "save" the Pope of Urd from folly.

Each time the eerie rumbling and cracking of the earth quivered beneath the castle, Warga Gadirus started in fright. When one is paralyzed and feels unable to flee to safety, one suffers under the constant threat of falling walls far more keenly than those who can trust in the quickness of their own feet.

Armane Torgaard sat on a small stool before her friend, gently caressing her beautiful hands—hands that were no longer rough and work-worn as they once had been. The royal maiden felt a pang of guilt toward the gardener of Urd. She leaned her cheek softly, tenderly, against the invalid's hand, unable to bear looking into those desolate, great eyes that stared fixedly into the distance, as though they could see through walls of stone and of hearts alike.

Warga bent her head over the golden hair of the king's daughter and kissed her. All the jealousy, all the bitterness that had flared up within her in lonely hours—whenever she thought of Baldur and Armane—was now silent. A young, innocent girl, with the laughter of a child, had taken from her all that she had ever longed for.

"Soon you'll be well again, Warga," whispered the princess through quiet sobs. "Now you're finally among friends."

"You think so?" asked the gardener softly. "I hope so too, but I believe there's only one kind of health left for me—one no physician can give, no healing spring can grant. And that health may come sooner, Armane, than either of us imagine."

"You mean the destruction of us all, by the star Heldung?" asked the royal girl, lifting her fair head.

"No… we will survive the Days of Heldung," answered Warga. "In that, I share Baldur's confidence—that the measures for salvation will be crowned with success. I meant something else… but it wasn't kind of me to speak it aloud."

"You want to die," said Armane reproachfully.

"Since you've said it, child of the king—yes," replied the gardener quietly.

"What will Baldur say, if you…"

"Baldur?" Warga Gadirus smiled faintly. "Baldur? He'll be very sad, I'm sure, when he hears that his faithful ally Warga lives no more. But he will forget, Armane. Sometimes he will still think of me—he'll come to my grave one day and adorn it with flowers. But he will also breathe easier when I am gone—believe me, my dear. He feels weighed down by the guilt of gratitude he thinks he owes me, and gratitude is easier to bear toward the dead than the living. He will love me more once I'm gone than he could while I linger here—a cripple, exhausted, and ruined."

"Warga!" pleaded Armane Torgaard in despair.

The gardener tried to wrap her clumsy, unresponsive arms around her friend's shoulders. "For natures like Baldur Wieborg's," she continued, "forgiveness is no rare thing. He must forgive—his work cannot flourish otherwise. Such a man remains always a youth, even at thirty-five, which he counts now. An eternal spring lives in his soul—an untamable thirst for action, a keen mind, a merciless clarity. He wins hearts because he cannot do otherwise—like an innocent predator…"

"How little you know Baldur," said Armane, hurt.

"And yet I only say what you yourself know, royal child," answered Warga Gadirus. "I didn't mean to wound you. If there is bitterness in my words, it's not the bitterness of a wasted life, but of a woman once full of joy, whom the poison from Urd robbed of every hope that a healthy young girl might hold. Don't forget—it hasn't been easy for me."

"I know that well, Warga," said Armane remorsefully. "You sacrificed everything for Baldur. I can't even judge what it was—for it wasn't only your health that you lost in his service."

"In Baldur's service?" smiled the gardener of Urd faintly. "No, Armane, not quite as you say. Baldur Wieborg was to me more than the triumphant spirit of spring who sweeps hearts along whether they will or no. Baldur was to me the embodiment of a new age—of an uplifting idea. He was the liberator from the unworthy fetters of the spirit, the man who could fling open the gates of a new dawn of nations, the seer who bore the divine within him, perhaps without even knowing it. His love of truth, his purity of will and deed, his boundless hatred of all that was unclear and muddled—of idolatry and priestly arrogance—his dreamlike certainty in choosing the means that led to the goal—all this gave me the strength to remain faithful to him. — Armane, it was not easy."

"You do not know Baldur's faithfulness," sobbed Armane.

"My dearest royal child," said the gardener of Urd softly. "It is exactly his faithfulness that I know — as only a woman can know it, who holds him in as high an esteem as I do. It is precisely that faithfulness I fear, as though it were my enemy."

"Baldur loves you," the king's daughter lied bravely, bowing her golden head in deep shame upon the invalid's knees. Across Warga's delicate, intelligent features passed something like a faint, pained smile.

"I know that, Armane — I know that he loves me," she replied with forced calm. "But I also know that he is faithful to me — as only an honorable and good man like Baldur Wieborg can be. And now, let us speak openly at last

of what so deeply stirs us both. I can tell you — you must have known it for a long time, and many of our friends surely suspect it: I love Baldur Wieborg — not merely as an ally and fighter for his ideals, which are also mine — but as a woman, whose youth of feeling even poison could not destroy."

The royal maiden pressed her face deeper into her friend's lap, her lovely shoulders trembling with grief. Gently, the gardener stroked the round head of the king's daughter, as though she could soothe away the sorrow that had been an unwelcome guest in both their hearts for years.

"And now, dear royal child, I must ask you a question," continued Warga Gadirus. "You need not answer it aloud — you may keep silence; I shall read the true answer in that silence. — Can you imagine a Baldur Wieborg at the side of a paralyzed woman — a woman whose very life-blood has been poisoned to the marrow? Do you believe love could endure, when a strong and blooming soul is bound for life to one whose vitality has been broken at its root? — Don't tell me the physicians still have hope that I'll recover. I think they no longer believe in their own assurances. And even if their skill should bring me so far that I might walk again without crutches — I could never again be a true companion for a long life. And you know that we of northern blood still hold sacred the bond that is meant for life — even we who are but recognized Asen, no longer pure-blooded like the true Northmen. Yet within us too lives the Asic spirit — prouder and firmer than blood itself."

The gardener fell silent, listening for whether Armane Torgaard would reply. She merely heard a strangled sob. Warga nodded faintly.

"Royal child!" she went on, almost tenderly. "My question was not a pleasant one — I would gladly have spared you it. But look, Armane, we must have clarity between us. We cannot live forever side by side as mistrustful rivals. Surely we love each other — and truly, from the heart — yet if you are honest, you must admit that at times something like hatred has risen in your heart when you thought of the gardener of Urd. I will be just as honest. Often I have thought of you with bitterness and envy. It hurts, royal child — it hurts deeply — when one must watch another girl, healthy and beautiful, crush every hope of the less fortunate sister, without even meaning to — and all the while, if I may repeat a word that earlier wounded you when it was spoken of Baldur — as innocent as a predator."

"I took nothing from you, Warga!" protested Armane Torgaard. "Yes — I love Baldur Wieborg. I cannot help it. But he cannot and will not marry me — if only because he is a farmer's son from Thule, and I am a Torgaard of Atlantis."

"Do they not say that the High King intends to make Baldur a Reichsgraf — a Count of the Realm?" asked Warga quietly. "And should you not know of it?"

"Lord Gunnar Gepide heard of it," admitted Armane, ashamed. "My father offered Baldur the title aboard the Hammersar, but Baldur refused it. — I know why."

"Yes, old chamberlains do gossip," smiled Warga faintly. "But I know the appointment will come — whether Baldur wishes it or not. Perhaps it is someone else who wishes it — some royal maiden? Don't be angry, Armane — we must speak plainly. I know how poison stings, and I want to draw all poison from our hearts, as far as possible for two unpredictable human beings like us. Don't you think the path from the farmer's son of Thule to the king's daughter of Torgaard will then be open?"

"Even then, it would still be barred," said Armane, lifting her slender head to look her friend straight and clearly in the eye.

"Out of loyalty?" asked Warga — and now her own shoulders trembled, and her eyes grew dim with gathering tears.

"Yes — out of loyalty, Warga," confirmed the royal maiden.

"So it will come to pass as I thought," murmured the gardener of Urd, more to herself than to her friend. "The crippled girl stands between Baldur and your happiness."

Armane did not answer. With desolate eyes, she gazed into the drifting clouds above the mountains.

"There seems to be no solution," Warga continued softly. "A rift yawns through our lives — lives that were once so worth living, even if they have since been poisoned."

"I don't know what to say anymore," sobbed Armane, despairing.

"Perhaps I know one last way out," said the gardener with a faint smile.

Horrified, the king's daughter grasped her friend's white hands.
"You mustn't do that!" she cried in alarm.

Warga Gadirus shook her head.
"What you're thinking now — I will not do," she said calmly. "The easy way of fleeing life — I won't take it. One does that only when one was unequal to a great cause, when one has failed — perhaps if Baldur's and my

work had been in vain. But that we cannot say. Our little personal fate is not worthy of the consecration of a self-chosen death. Such paths are contemptible and unworthy of our pride as northern Asen. One bears one's own lot, Armane; it is not so important.

—I have no ill will toward you, royal child. My flame of life will soon extinguish of its own accord, though it may take some years yet. I can't explain it, but one feels it. And time will make much right again. For Baldur and for you, too, time will ripen. I could show you a document, Armane. I don't have it with me; it lies, I think, in my little travel chest. But you'll believe me even without it, if I tell you.

—Have you ever heard of our Office of Race?"

The princess looked at her friend questioningly.

"You must have heard of it," Warga continued. "I had dealings with it once — first when my father submitted the petition that his children, Odil and Warga, be admitted into the circle of the pure-blooded Asen. Later, I had dealings with the office again. I left it with a heavier heart than I entered it — and that was not long ago. You know that the Race Office only grants marriage to those of sound health, and that it is not easy to obtain the medical certifications required. The laws of Atlantis are severe in this respect, and many loving couples have had to renounce marriage because even their State-King or the High King refused a special dispensation.

—I was forbidden marriage by the Race Office."

"Yes, if you approached them in that sense — without medical examination, without tests — only with the wish to obtain such a prohibition — then indeed they would grant it," replied Armane Torgaard, unable to hide the sudden light that came into her honest young eyes. "When the officials of the Race Office see a young woman walking with a cane, or on crutches, and hear that she was poisoned five years ago — it's no wonder they issue the desired certificate at once, declaring marriage inadmissible."

"Then you believe," asked the gardener quietly, "that the High King will grant an exception in my case?"

"If Baldur requests it — yes," replied Armane firmly.

"And will he request it?"

"As I know him — certainly," declared the king's daughter with conviction.

Then the pale, beautiful gardener leaned forward and kissed her friend on the mouth.

"Baldur knows only one path," the princess reaffirmed, "that of honor and loyalty."

"And what does Armane Torgaard think of Warga Gadirus's honor?" asked the invalid, with a faint, aching smile.

"No less highly than of Baldur's," said Armane.

"And who, then, may hope?" asked the gardener, with a gentle, heartbreaking expression about her fine, narrow mouth.

Armane Torgaard wrapped her arms around Warga's neck and answered softly:

"Neither of us. We must bear our broken love as honorable northern maidens must — with pride and sorrow. I've learned much from you, Warga — and I'll learn the last lesson too: not to think of Baldur Wieborg anymore."

"Can you do that?" asked the gardener.

"I'll try," promised the king's child, uncertain again, turning away her clear, luminous eyes.

"Keep at least a little hope for yourself, Armane," advised Warga kindly. "And hope in time. You're still very young — and one day Warga Gadirus will no longer stand between you lovers. That will be when she has faded, when the rosebush on her memorial mound bears many red roses, grown strong from the power of the love that streamed from the earth into it. And only the thorns will recall her pain — but they are carefully broken off, for they may still hold a trace of poison that once shattered Warga Gadirus's body, but could never harm her soul. She lived through Baldur's soul, not her own. Her soul was one eternal spring — and there are few women on this earth who may say that of themselves in honest truth."

In the courtyard, weapons clattered as the Asgard-Asen took arms. Horses stamped restlessly upon the flagstones; the sharp bark of orders echoed against the walls of the castle and its defenses.

"The High King mounts his horse," said Warga.

"And there comes Baldur," added Armane, her eyes alight. "He's riding the white horse from Father's stables in Paardegatt. Baldur didn't want to take it — because it was white, and because Grandfather rode it last."

"And now?" asked the gardener. "Now he rides it after all?"

"Father said the Spring of Atlantis must ride through the land upon a white horse," smiled the princess. "And Mother said so too. So Baldur yielded."

"The spring knows not the autumn," said Warga Gadirus thoughtfully. "So he should ride the white horse. The High King was right to give it to him. Who could imagine Baldur otherwise — than as a radiant victor, astride a white steed? I cannot."

"Nor can I," said Armane, with all her heart.

Spring

Baldur Wieborg's deft stratagem—to proclaim the recognition of the citizens of the Atlantean islands through a law enacted under martial authority—had achieved its full effect. Since it was a domestic law requiring ratification by the collective of the state-kings, its passage under ordinary, peaceful circumstances would have been highly improbable. But now, rejection was no longer possible.

The jubilation of the populace knew no bounds whenever Baldur Wieborg or the High King appeared in public. Heavy though the psychological pressure was on the inhabitants of the mountain barracks—refugees from the temporarily abandoned islands—no one begrudged the general enfranchisement announced weeks earlier in the message of the new High King, Wittmund Ase Torgaard. The people trusted that the imperial government would master the remaining difficulties and border-cases of recognition with the same determined vigor that Wieborg's relentless will had already shown in forcing through the foundational law under the emergency powers of the Heroic Ordeal decrees.

The High King had expressly emphasized the participation of the Atlantean people, and had made this clear in his inaugural message.

As the vast flood-tide of the sea slowly but steadily receded, and hope rekindled in the hearts of the frightened masses—like a spark half-smothered beneath the ashes, awakened anew by a breath of wind—Asgard riders nailed small strips of red leather to doors and walls throughout every refugee camp in the highlands, in all the seized monasteries of the High Solar Gate, in every village and town, on the estates and castles that were royal fiefs or Allvater holdings of the crown.

These strips bore the signature and wax seal of High King Wittmund Ase Torgaard—and, for the first time in the history of the realm, were countersigned by Reichsgraf Baldur Wieborg himself, on behalf of all the imperial ministries of Atlantis. The High King had thus placed the entirety of the Asgard's administrative offices—until then directly answerable only to the throne—under the authority of his secretary, Wieborg.

The law was provisionally promulgated pending the formal assent of the state-kings, and its legal foundation was the royal proclamation issued upon Wittmund's accession to the throne.

That the assent of the state-kings, under such circumstances, could only be a mere formality was obvious. To revoke this law against the will of the entire people was simply impossible. The goal toward which the vast empire had

been striving for centuries had, in this fateful and difficult time, at last been achieved and fulfilled.

Within days of the law's provisional proclamation, people were already speaking of the new spring in Atlantis, and the name of the farmer's son from Thule became the very symbol of that springtime. The elated mood burst forth in jubilant greetings whenever the High King and his Count of the Realm rode together through the wide valleys of the continent-sized island. That joy was needed to sustain the people for what soon had to come — the return to their old homeland.

Burgrave Herbing Ase Kopping had been right to fear that the realm would be a heap of ruins once the flood had receded; and for the reconstruction of what was destroyed, Lord Wittmund intended to employ the iron will of Count Baldur Wieborg. His tireless, purposeful capacity for work, his popularity that verged on worship, and the boundless confidence placed in him by citizens and laborers alike — as the author of the new Recognition Law — made him the obvious man for the immense task that the former head of the War Office, Burgrave Kopping, could no longer perform nor wished to.

The Venerable Father of Urd, Lord Amenor Lochi, now found himself forced into a defensive position in an age that seemed to have slipped from its hinges. Indeed, he no longer even had the means to make such a defense effective, for behind the proclamation of martial law lurked the unbending will of that young favorite of fortune, Baldur Wieborg — who, five years earlier, had begun his struggle against the High Solar Gate with his audacious raid upon the treasury vault of the high-priestly palace, and who since then had carried on his campaign methodically and successfully.

Amenor Lochi had remained in Urd, along with the priesthood of non-Asic blood and a few of northern lineage who still held faith with him. There were more traitors among the priests of the High Solar Gate than he had ever deemed possible. Among the spiritual counselors and chamberlains, only a few remained in whom he could still place trust.

In whom could he trust, when even his own chamberlain, Odil Gadirus, had gone over to Baldur Wieborg? The directors of the observatories already scented the new era. Even the teachers of the priestly schools within the temple city — once his most devoted adherents — saw the very foundations of their existence begin to quake. Had not the young Wieborg, in the halls of the Academy for General Spiritual Sciences, demanded that all schools be placed solely under the supervision of the states and the empire — and that the priestly seminaries be subject to the same standards binding upon public institutions?

The intricate edifice of the High Solar Gate was already creaking before Wieborg had yet struck it with the heavy hammer of law.

Amenor Lochi paced beneath the rose-arches of his palace garden. After long and anxious weeks, the sun was cautiously shining again through the torn clouds above the temple city — as though it scarcely believed that the star Heldung had once more freed itself from Earth's gravitational bond and continued its altered orbit around the day-star.

What did it matter to the Papas that part of his high-priestly palace now lay in ruins, shattered by the mightiest earthquakes the realm had known in living memory? In the midst of divine service — when he had personally implored the Earth-Mother to spare the people and the realm — the ungracious goddess had shuddered and hurled her own image from the altar, where it broke upon the lava tiles of the sanctuary before the eyes of the worshippers.

It had been impossible to calm the panic-stricken multitude. In terror they had fled to the gardens and lawns of the temple city; beneath the narrow arch of the Sun Gate, the trampling of the crowd piled bodies high — especially women and children, crushed or suffocated in the chaos. Falling stone beams from the cloistered walks of the shrine buried many beneath their weight.

And then came the worst blow that could befall the Venerable Father:

The High King — whom he had believed firmly within his grasp — sent the High Solar Gate a short but unmistakably clear decree, countersigned by Baldur Wieborg. All divine services and devotions in the temples of Urd, even the ordinary rites of the Sun, were to be suspended until further notice for the safety of the congregations. A most reasonable edict — and in light of the heavy toll of life taken by the last supplicatory mass to the holy Earth-Mother, any objection would have been futile, even absurd.

Amenor Lochi had grown old.

In the hard days of the Heldung-crisis he had even neglected to dye his hair, which now showed in a yellowish gray beneath his soft priest's cap.

The Venerable Father stepped up to the balustrade that bordered his garden against the steep cliffs falling away to the great plain of the Idafield and looked down upon the re-emerged giant city at his feet.

An indescribable swarming teemed through the streets and crawled over the squares. Whole thousands of laborers were clearing the pavements of Atlantis from sand, shells, and seaweed—from the living creatures of the sea that had failed to follow the retreating flood back to their element. Barges that had sunk during the inundation and were now raised again filled with mud and rubble and moved slowly, driven by weary oars, through the canals toward the sea, there to dump their loads in deep water.

The citizens of Atlantis had no patience to wait for the arrival of the fleets from the Inner Sea, whose approach had already been signaled by the partially restored beacon-stations of the realm. The strangest craft lay moored at the landing-steps of the houses; small galleys that had been carefully stored in cellars were brought out and floated deep in the ring-canals, laden with sand and sludge from kitchens and living rooms.

A fever of industry had seized Atlantis, as if everyone had to be the first to have his home clean and habitable again. Roofers clambered over half-collapsed roofs; carpenters appeared and vanished with timbers that had drifted through the streets—planks bearing no marks of which great warehouse or harbor shed they came from—and used the happy chance to do long-needed repairs for their old customers with this very cheap wood. Such small sins were deliberately overlooked by the officers of the city watch; they had enough to do preventing larger thefts and bringing offenders to punishment.

Count Wieborg had, by exception, placed several thousand soldiers at their disposal—men who felt none too comfortable in their new role as watchmen against thieves, yet carried out this unaccustomed duty with exemplary vigor.

Down the imperial road from Urd rolled endless trains of wagons bringing food from the mountain depots to the Idafield. The War Office let the stores that had been piled up for a year be plundered without hesitation, for the state-king of Acora, Brammerloh, and Aargund, Lord Hagenot Skullorn, had dispatched a swift galley announcing the near arrival of a supply fleet with provisions for Atlantis.

The northernmost islands of the empire had suffered little from the great flood. With the consent of old Lord Kopping, King Hagenot had drawn a loaded fleet into an inland lake and taken the responsibility upon himself should it be lost. It had not been lost—only a few ships had run aground with minor damage—and was even now, as the swift galley reported, passing the newly emerged harbor of Steerkopp, expected to reach Atlantis within days.

But already the swift galley was dashing out again to sea—and Amenor Lochi did not know that Baldur Wieborg was diverting part of the welcome food fleet toward Lipore, Harvesum, and Murnaat, where the flood might have reached and spoiled certain storehouses. Even the astronomers of the solar observatories had not reckoned on the waters rising five hundred feet, and the imperial government was deeply anxious for the fate of the three mountain islands.

With eyes full of bitterness Amenor Lochi gazed upon the ancient fortress of Asgard, whose massive circular tiers stood in the midst of the great city as though no power of earth or heaven could harm it.

There the hundreds of Asgard-Asen labored, reinforced by soldiers from the old city's armories and by master-builders and craftsmen of the royal lodge. The entire weapons stock of the second tier had been brought back from the highlands and for the moment lay stored in the open air.

An innumerable swarm of tiny figures moved across every platform; others hung on ropes from the outer walls, clearing the shining metal sheathing of the great stone ring of sea-growth and shells.

It seemed as though a kind of madness for cleanliness had broken out below—an obsession to master and undo the damage inflicted by that malicious enemy out there in the cosmos upon Atlantis.

Amenor Lochi admitted to himself that, in his handling of Count Wieborg, he had made a mistake that could never be undone. What was meant by "handling" in the circles of the High Solar Gate left no doubt. It meant the neutralization of an opponent by any means—by entangling him in moral guilt, through loans, gifts, marriages, love affairs, and other seemingly harmless devices that poisoned the soul rather than the body.

That these "harmless" means were in fact far more dangerous than poison or dagger—resorted to only in the most desperate cases—the Papas of Urd knew very well. The enforcement of the secret orders, with their soul-destroying and unclean cults, with their oaths binding members to a superior who knew every secret of human ecstasy and animal lust, and who was appointed to make these experiences increasingly accessible to the initiates under ever-renewed oaths—this had been one of the weapons by which the priesthood of Urd ruled the Atlantean world, or at least had ruled it until now.

Through the betrayal of the spiritual counselor and chamberlain Odil Gadirus, whose obedience to the wishes of the Venerable Father had once been exemplary, even this weapon now seemed broken. If the clerical counselor Gadirus had conducted his secret missions in understanding with that same Wieborg—and if the Duke and now High King excused his own participation in the rites of the secret orders by claiming it had been solely to expose the guilty—then the achievements of centuries had been destroyed.

The High Solar Gate—with its host of priests, spiritual counselors, chamberlains, and affiliated heads of countless guilds whose members commanded economic power in every sphere—had suffered a decisive defeat. And over the ruins of this proud and intricate edifice for the domination of souls and passions in a million-strong army of open and hidden adherents, there now fluttered the blue banner of the Empire bearing the ancient, pure solar emblem. In invisible script upon the finial of the flagstaff was inscribed the victory-rune of Baldur of Thule.

Amenor Lochi no longer knew whether the document that so gravely compromised High King Wittmund Ase Torgaard was still in the hands of the usurper Wieborg. It no longer mattered—nor by what means or influence the young man now held sway over the King. But during the days of the Heldung-catastrophe, the Venerable Father of Urd began to understand that Baldur Wieborg had never used the tested and familiar tools of statecraft, nor had his ambition lain in dominating the King. It now seemed more than likely that Baldur, with dreamlike certainty, had chosen ruthless frankness and truth as his weapon: the destruction of enemies by every means, the conquest of friends through the spirit of truth and honor—that had been Wieborg's unorthodox method of warfare.

And this man had already triumphed even before the annihilating decrees from Asgard struck the High Solar Gate like lightning. Of their coming, the Venerable Father had not the slightest doubt. His own counselors had listened to and, in part, transcribed word-for-word the lectures of the then-Captain Wieborg. And what the young man, without rank or influence, had once demanded, he would now, as Count of the Realm, carry out with inexorable resolve.

The High Priest, laughing grimly, counted off on his fingers the laws whose wording he already knew almost by heart:

Introduction and extension of the Asic land law to the estates of the High Solar Gate in the ten home kingdoms.

Application of the same land law to the border provinces.

Taxation of income and property, of trade by sea and by land, of the priestly stipends — and even of the Papas of Urd himself — according to the same assessment to which the lay world had to submit.

Public disclosure of the statutes of the secret orders.

Public disclosure of assets and of monies loaned abroad.

Strict supervision of the priestly schools by the Imperial Office for Public Education; transfer of all schools influenced by the High Solar Gate into state administration; proof of fair payment to the workers in the orphanages and sewing schools, in the workshops and shelters, in the farms and gardens of the privileged hermit houses in the realm and its borderlands.

Amenor Lochi could practically have offered his services to Count Wieborg as a clerk — he knew so precisely what was to come.

There was no stopping it.

It was now pointless to subject Baldur Wieborg to any "priestly treatment" designed to bring about his timely demise. The only course left was to mitigate, through negotiations with Lord Wittmund and by skillful accommodation, the worst effects of the coming laws. Proposals from loyal counselors to remove Wieborg from the struggle between Empire and Gate by poison had been recognized by Amenor Lochi — whose political insight could not be denied — as mistaken, and he had rejected them.

Not that he had suddenly grown fond of the Count — quite the opposite was true. But the Venerable Father of Urd knew all too well that Baldur's sudden death would be written upon the ledger of guilt of the High Solar Gate. The Papas would then risk not only the loss of his influence, but of his position and his life as well.

He had, in fact, expressly forbidden his adherents to take such desperate measures against the Count, and had left no doubt that he himself would deliver any culprit to the imperial prosecutor if a single hair on Wieborg's head were harmed.

But this prohibition did not mean that vengeance upon the man from Thule was renounced. Amenor Lochi was accustomed to thinking and working in the long term. In the meshes of every human law, there was usually some opening — and men such as the Venerable Father of Urd knew how to find it. Time could yet turn much in his favor.

If the people of Atlantis greeted the new laws for the moment with enthusiasm, Amenor Lochi trusted in the limited judgment of the common man, and in his perpetual susceptibility to superstition, which not even a Baldur Wieborg could ever eradicate.

The High Priest of the Solar Gate still trusted — as he always had, and as the traditions of the idol-priesthood taught — in the stupidity of his fellow men. And this thrice-blessed stupidity, he hoped confidently, would one day again open the path for the High Solar Gate to unfold new power.

Everything depended on exploiting, in the future, the weak point of the Recognition Law — namely, to twist it into its opposite and to make recognition easier for alien races. The Asic spirit was the born enemy of priestly domination and spiritual bondage, of superstition and unclean idolatrous cults. To break the northern spirit — that had been, and must remain, the supreme and desirable goal.

If it succeeded in keeping the blood and spirit of the lower races permanently settled in Atlantis, then the "springtime of Baldur Wieborg" would prove to be only a fleeting season.

"As every springtime is," thought Amenor Lochi, with a confident smile.

Soft footsteps crunched upon the sanded path. The Papas of Urd turned and recognized one of his Abyssinian servants, who bore a parchment in his great black fist. The man knelt before his spiritual master, handed him the letter, then rose and quickly departed toward the Palace of Urd.

The Venerable Father sat down upon a semicircular bench of white marble and loosened the thread. The joyful gleam in his dark eyes faded into an expression of sadness, almost of despair, as he read:

"Warga Gadirus to the Venerable Father of Urd,
Lord Amenor Lochi.

In answer to your gracious invitation to resume my position as gardener of your parks in Urd, I regret that I cannot do so on account of my poor health.
I shall receive medical care in my father's house, as I place my trust in the physician who has hitherto attended me.

— Warga."

The Venerable Father crushed the parchment in his hand. Even the girl for whom his heart had clung — perhaps all the more fiercely for her suffering — was leaving him. Blindly he had trusted the beautiful gardener, and even now he could not bring himself to suspect her of treachery to the cause of the High Solar Gate.

So even his Warga Gadirus scented the coming dawn, and avoided following the sinking star of Amenor Lochi.

For Atlantis, another star had risen — Baldur Wieborg.

It was, of course, also conceivable that the betrayal of her brother had prompted the gardener to sever her connections with the Gate. People in Atlantis might indeed have been astonished if the sister of Odil had once again entered the service of the Venerable Father — even if those services were no longer required, since the girl was no longer able to work in the gardens.

"I shall petition the High King — and, if necessary, I will humble myself to present my request to Count Wieborg himself — that he leave the girl

to me. A paralyzed gardener will surely not interest that cold-hearted fortune-hunter. Perhaps he will even, out of political shrewdness, advise her to return to Urd, once he sees how much it means to me. It is not insignificant whether the new laws are carried out against my will or with my tacit consent. The Count must realize that too. That I wish the girl well I have shown a hundred times in recent years through my deeds. I shall therefore write to the King."

Amenor Lochi smoothed the crumpled parchment and read again the letter of his beloved gardener. There seemed little warmth in Warga's words, yet no hardness either — nothing that utterly destroyed hope. And since the Venerable Father wanted to hope, he failed to see how hopeless his hope truly was.

"I shall write the letter to the High King at once," he said half aloud, and rose to return to his palace — the one in which several chambers, including his resting room and the entrance to the treasury cellar, had remained intact.

But as he stepped out from the rose alleys and the view of the path to the palace opened before him, he saw approaching his adjutant, the clerical counselor Atahualka Chun, the Mexican, who — to his own good fortune — had renounced independent thought, unlike his Egyptian predecessor Pheras. The man announced that Count Baldur Wieborg had come to call.

"He came alone?" asked Amenor Lochi, unable to conceal his dismay at the pallor that crossed his face.

"The Lord Count is without escort. He has given his white horse to one of the masons and waits in the front colonnade," replied the counselor.

"Alone…" murmured the Papas of Urd.

A tremendous bitterness welled up in him. That Wieborg! He knew he was coming to his mortal enemy — yet scorned to bring even a single groom for protection. Did the Count not know that in Urd there existed hair-thin thorns of tempered brass that willing hands could press into the reins of a waiting horse — thorns that pierced through the riding glove without drawing even a drop of blood? Did he not fear that those thorns might be steeped in the subtle poisons of priestly statecraft? Did he not know what delicate, deadly toxins the gardens of Urd concealed — some that killed slowly and insidiously, others that struck down their victim like lightning?

Yes, Baldur Wieborg knew all this — and yet he came so serenely, as though he were paying a visit to a friend.

Now the Papas smiled again — even a little flattered. Wieborg rightly judged the wisdom of the High Solar Gate. He knew that it was, for now, too

late for poison and dagger — that the Venerable Father had become tame, because the moment demanded it. The Count had calculated well: in Urd he was as safe as in the High King's own hall at Asgard.

"Where will you receive the Lord Count?" asked the deferential Atahualka Chun, in the reverent tone due to the High Priest.

"I shall have Lord Wieborg brought into the garden — the chambers of the palace are uninhabitable," answered Amenor Lochi with dignity. "Escort the Count here."

"Would it not be wise if a few counselors were present at the meeting?" ventured Atahualka cautiously.

"No, thank you," replied the Papas curtly. "The Count clearly wishes to speak with me alone. But remain within call, Reverend Counselor — and station two of the Abyssinians discreetly nearby. Under no circumstances, however, are they to be seen."

The adjutant bowed deeply and withdrew. The Venerable Father remained standing in the middle of the wide gravel path, plainly visible so that Wieborg would see him at once upon leaving the palace. He waited with mingled feelings for the unwelcome guest.

He did not wait long. With the long, swift stride by which one could recognize him from afar — the stride that proclaimed him a friend of kings even before his features were clear — Count Baldur Wieborg of Atlantis emerged from the Palace of Urd. He crossed the broad forecourt of lava tiles with quick, firm steps and descended the stairs into the garden.

He wore, as usual, his leather cuirass without insignia, the half-length sword at his side, and bronze greaves upon his legs. Because he was visiting the highest spiritual dignitary of the realm, he had set upon his head the brass helm that bore the diadem of an Imperial Count of Atlantis — a golden circlet inlaid with blue gemstones. The leather riding gloves he held in his right hand — a clear sign that he did not intend to greet his adversary with friendly intimacy.

Broad-shouldered, Wieborg stood before the much smaller Papas of Urd, his gray, ice-cold eyes freezing the other's dark ones.

"Good evening, Venerable Father," he said in a hard, clear voice. "I come at the express wish of High King Wittmund Ase Torgaard to speak a few words with you — words that may be important for the future. I therefore ask you to grant me a brief moment, to discuss what the imperial government deems necessary."

"I am pleased that you have found your way to me, Lord Count Wieborg," replied the Papas with the majestic composure he could summon for any audience. "If it pleases you, let us walk among the roses and take our seats on the bench by the Cliff of Urd. It is my favorite spot in the garden — from there I can look down upon proud Atlantis, which has always lain at the feet of the sanctuaries of the High Solar Gate."

Baldur Wieborg hid a faint smile and followed silently.

The white marble semicircular bench allowed the two enemies to sit opposite one another — and to observe each other with complete ease.

"You know well, Venerable Father, that I come to you as an irreconcilable enemy," began Baldur Wieborg, speaking plainly.

"That is not unknown to me," replied Amenor Lochi, with a politely mocking wave of the hand.

"To remove all misunderstanding from the outset," continued the Count of Atlantis, "I wish to make one thing clear. My enmity is not directed against your person as such. There are even reasons that might speak for the opposite — namely, your tireless care for the sister of my friend, the astronomer and spiritual counselor of Agni: Lady Warga Gadirus."

The Papas of Urd nodded in understanding — and, at the same time, a spark of the hope he had nursed earlier rekindled within him: the hope he had planned to express in a letter to High King Wittmund — to win back his beautiful gardener, Warga.

"Therefore, I ask you to take all my words not as those of a bitter personal adversary, but as those of an open foe who combats worldviews, not men," said Wieborg with a cordial firmness that could not fail of its effect. "There are laws in preparation which directly concern the High Solar Gate. Yet, under all circumstances, the close association between the imperial government and you — the supreme head of spiritual authority in Atlantis — is to be preserved. This is not only the wish of the High King but my own as well.

"It is not our intention to inflict any injustice upon the High Solar Gate, as you may perhaps fear. Nevertheless, both I and the High King are aware that the laws now being prepared will be felt by you and by the priesthoods of the various cults as injustice. Even the recently promulgated law recognizing broad sections of the populace as equal Asen has caused deep agitation among the clergy, although that decree can harm the Solar Gate only indirectly."

"I have resigned myself to the fact," replied Amenor Lochi coolly. "Its injury is not demonstrable, though in time it will certainly come."

"The new laws likewise," continued Wieborg, "will, from the priesthood's standpoint, lessen the Gate's influence. Yet these laws contain no injustice. Nothing will be taken from you, or from the Gate, nor granted to you, that is not equally granted to — or withheld from — every citizen of Atlantis and the royal states of the realm, and later, indeed, to the frontier provinces under secure sovereignty.

"The influence of the High Solar Gate in matters of doctrine, economy, and maritime trade will undergo certain changes. Property in goods will not be touched; land and holdings only insofar as the present and future law regarding imperial land ownership require it. And even here, treatment shall be uniform throughout all member states.

"The High King is of the opinion that these changes will so profoundly alter the former plenitude of power held by the highest priest in the realm that voluntary cooperation cannot be expected. Therefore, His Majesty bids me convey to you this proposal: that you resign your office as Papas of Urd and yield your place to a successor whose past is untainted."

"My office is for life, and it was bestowed upon me by the gods," replied Amenor Lochi proudly. "Therefore I shall not resign — indeed, I may not."

"I would be grateful," said Baldur Wieborg with cutting sharpness, "if you would present the document by which one of those so-called gods conferred your lifetime office upon you." Though he refrained from open derision, the sting in his voice was unmistakable. "I have no comprehension for such obscure assertions.

"We Asen recognize but one divine force — we call it Allvater, for as men we are compelled to speak of the divine in human words. When our forefathers wrested the blessed islands of Atlantis through hard struggle, they might rightly have said they were granted them by Allvater. The divinity gives strength and fortune to the strong and capable — and we possessed both. Allvater's fief is the grateful expression of simple, clear-minded northern men, and we have no reason to alter its meaning or form.

"The solar service we brought with us from the cool North — a simple rite, symbolizing the divine circle of the year, the cycle of constant becoming and passing. We greeted the rising sun with the jubilant joy of childlike souls as a divine blessing; we mourned its setting — yet we knew of its eternal return.

"That, Venerable Father, is what we today can still discern and surmise of the divine — no more and no less. And in the perpetual return of life and

death, of rise and fall, we see the law we call Allvater. Try to shape it otherwise, and you arrive at what was your craft — superstition.

"If you would restore the northern solar faith in its original purity, then I would salute you as one whose office truly comes from Allvater — for then you would not contradict Him. But only then."

"You know," said Amenor Lochi cautiously, "to fulfill this demand in its entirety is forbidden to me by the Tradition — which recognizes not only the sun as divine symbol, but true divinities of personal nature, who maintain relations with the fallen race of men."

"I propose to make your resignation easier," said Count Baldur Wieborg, who saw that continuing any discussion about the nature of divinity would be useless. "It might, for example, be arranged that you were to fall ill. Such feigned ailments are not unknown to you. Both in the priestly and the civil administration they have often been used — successfully. I therefore recommend this to you, so that harsher measures, which the imperial government might otherwise be forced to apply, may be avoided."

The Count's words left nothing to interpretation. The Venerable Father remained silent and bowed his head thoughtfully. He would give no promise under any circumstances, but he could at least ask what arrangements the king would make for the former Papas should he indeed step down.

"And if I were to go?" asked Amenor Lochi slowly. "What would Lord Wittmund grant me in wealth and refuge?"

"What you already possess will not be taken from you," answered Baldur Wieborg promptly. "That your property will be subject to the same taxation that even the poorest dockworker must bear — that, I think, is self-evident, though perhaps new to you. Beyond that, the High King would likely be willing to grant you a castle of your choosing as a royal fief, and moreover a yearly pension corresponding to your years of service in Urd. To my knowledge, it would not be inconsiderable."

"These proposals are certainly worth consideration," said the Venerable Father gravely. "I cannot, of course, consent at once. I could only do so after being shown the wording of the legislative drafts. It is entirely possible that I might conform to the wishes of the High King — but until then I can say nothing, neither yes nor no."

"There is no objection to that wish," declared the Count without hesitation. "The laws contain no secrets. They are the result of mature deliberation and the expression of principles drawn from a worldview — one

whose understanding, however, I cannot presume in you. I will therefore have the copies delivered to you without delay."

Again the Venerable Father was silent for a time. Baldur waited patiently until the old man resolved to speak.

"There would be a way," said Amenor Lochi at length, "to make it easier for me to decide to feign this official illness you spoke of. It concerns a harmless request — one that would be very easy for the King to grant."

"If it is as you say, Venerable Father, then presumably nothing would prevent the request from being granted," replied Wieborg attentively, though already somewhat wary.

"The matter is this," the Papas continued. "You know that I once had in Urd a young woman as gardener — beautiful and intelligent, a master in the tending of my beloved roses. She fell ill in my service. Although I did all I could to relieve the dreadful paralysis, the poor girl still suffers. I know I can no longer employ her in my gardens — nor in those of the royal estate of which you spoke, Lord Count. But I owe a debt to this unfortunate child. I would like her to have the best care, the most skilled physicians… in short, I ask the High King to arrange that Lady Warga Gadirus return to Urd."

While his adversary spoke, Baldur Wieborg's features had turned to stone. An unyielding hardness, cold as flame, blazed from his gray eagle-eyes; one motion of his hand seemed to prepare the thousandfold no that was certain to follow.

Yet first he asked one question:

"What do you want with the girl, Venerable Father?"

"Nothing — what should I want?" replied Lochi softly. "You do not understand, Lord Count… I have grown accustomed to the girl."

"You need not petition the High King," said Baldur Wieborg. "Warga Gadirus will neither return to you in Urd nor live in any royal fief that may be granted to you. Your request — small as it seems — will not be granted. Any other may be. But not this one."

"Well, perhaps the King thinks otherwise," murmured Lochi, but in his dark eyes flashed the glint of hidden fury.

"What the High King thinks, I do not know," replied the Count coldly. "In this case it is irrelevant — for His Majesty cannot dispose of the will of a young woman."

"No, certainly not," insisted the Papas. "But an intercession by the King with Lady Warga might secure her consent."

"No," said Wieborg.

"And why not, Lord Count?" came the hiss from pale, anger-tightened lips; a terrible suspicion flickered in the eyes of the Venerable Father of Urd.

"Because," answered Baldur Wieborg, "the wife of Count Baldur Wieborg will not return to Urd — but will dwell upon the Asgard in Atlantis."

"She is your wife!" cried the priest — so violently that Baldur looked at him in astonishment. A burning hatred flickered in the eyes of the Venerable Father.

"Not yet," the Count clarified calmly. "But I hope she soon will be. At first, the Race Office raised objections because of her illness. But now I have the King's approval, and the Office has yielded as well. Unfortunately, Lady Warga has fallen ill again — she could not endure the strain of the mountain journey. But as soon as she is somewhat recovered… though that does not belong to our discussion, Venerable Father. What does concern it is my final refusal. I am sorry."

The last words came sincerely from Baldur Wieborg's heart. The Papas of Urd had turned ashen-gray, had collapsed in on himself, breathing heavily. The priest, usually so composed, had lost all self-control.

Baldur rose.

"I see to my regret that you are unwell, Venerable Father," he said, and genuine pity resonated in his tone. He suddenly felt remorse for having struck so harshly at the old man. But who could have imagined that this ruthless master of Urd would collapse so swiftly?

The Papas did not answer, nor did he lift his eyes to look at the Count. It appeared a sudden, grave seizure had struck him.

Baldur Wieborg hurried through the rose paths out into the open air. There stood Atahualka Chun, the clerical counselor, leaning forward and listening — for he had heard his master's outcry.

"The Venerable Father has fallen ill," said Baldur quickly. "See to it, Reverend Counselor, that his personal physician is summoned at once. I shall wait here in the meantime."

"Thank you, Lord Count," replied Atahualka coolly. "There is no need for you to trouble yourself."

Then he motioned to the Abyssinian guards, hidden behind the bushes, and spoke a few words to them in a foreign tongue. The black men immediately disappeared at a run into the Palace of Urd.

"I shall call for the doctor, Lord Count," said the adjutant with cold courtesy. "Therefore, I must beg you to excuse me — I wish to tend to the Venerable Father myself."

"I will inquire during the night after his condition," assured Baldur. "For now, please convey to him my wishes for a swift recovery."

Then followed a short, very cool bow — and the audience with the Papas of Urd was over.

Thoughtfully, the Count walked around the palace to where his white horse waited, mounted, and rode slowly toward the gate. A cold wind came down from the mountains, and Baldur shivered. In the shadow of the Mountains of Urd, evening chill descended swiftly.

Meanwhile, Atahualka Chun had rejoined his master — who now stood crouched, like a cat ready to spring, before the marble bench. There was no longer the slightest sign of illness. Yet he gathered himself with effort when he recognized his subordinate.

"You are ill, Venerable Father!" cried Atahualka anxiously. "I have—"

"Speak no nonsense," snapped the Papas. "If you have dared to summon the doctor, dismiss him at once!"

The clerical counselor ran off so fast that his long silk robe fluttered through the rosebushes — for the eyes of his master boded nothing good.

Breathing deeply, Amenor Lochi stepped to the balustrade. Below, in Atlantis, the tiny points of streetlights began to glow. Evening had come upon the vast city, while here above in Urd, the last rays of the sun still shimmered upon the roses.

"Warga… Baldur…" murmured the Papas of Urd.

Then he fell silent, lips pressed tightly together. Long he stood thus, staring into the valley with eyes that burned with hatred.

The adjutant returned and asked for further orders.

The Venerable Father turned and fixed him with a piercing gaze.

"On Asgard Street, not far from the King's Bridge, there stands a house belonging to one of my counselors," he said slowly.

"Yes, it is the property of High Chamberlain Holmer Wode, an acknowledged Ase," confirmed the treasurer. "But the lord has not yet returned to Atlantis; he is said to be ill and staying in the Hermitage of the Holy Fire in the mountains of Garmalen."

"Obtain for me the keys to Holmer Wode's house," commanded Amenor Lochi. "Then send a messenger to the Hermitage of the Holy Fire and tell the old man that he is to remain in the mountains until further notice — he is not to return to Atlantis. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Venerable Father," replied the adjutant.

"Once I have the keys," said the Papas, "you will forget everything we have just spoken of, Atahualka."

"Everything, Venerable Father," assured the subordinate.

"Then you may go."

Edmund Kiß

Baldur's Death

The constitutional scholar Weeling Ase Gadirus, together with other academics of his discipline, had resumed his lectures at the university. As usual, a large number of students of administrative science attended. At the request of the Imperial Government, which in this case too was carrying out Baldur Wieborg's intentions, a sweeping campaign of enlightenment had been incorporated into the curriculum. This campaign was directed against the presumptuous power of the idol-priesthood that had dominated in the past centuries and demonstrated the need to restore to the free spirit of northern humanity the rightful place it must claim against the rampant superstition which the High Solar Gate had taught and favored.

These lectures were essentially a continuation and expansion of the courses that the young Captain Wieborg had established years earlier. For the Imperial Government, it was a worthy but extraordinarily difficult task — to combat an ingrained and in some places even beloved superstition with the sharp weapons of the intellect.

Count Wieborg therefore appointed a large number of scholars who honestly shared his convictions. He ordered lectures not only throughout Atlantis on the principles of the new reorganization of the Empire, but also on the islands of the state kings, who occasionally created difficulties because of personal ties to the old order.

As far as his work in the Asgard, where he served as director of all imperial offices, allowed it, the Count again took up lecturing himself. The crowds were so immense that he had to use the largest colonnades and grassy courtyards of the Agricultural Academy, which only just sufficed to hold them.

Baldur Wieborg had fallen into a kind of frenzied labor, an intensity of work never before known on the blessed islands of Atlantis, where no such exertion had ever been required. It was as if, suddenly, time itself had become something essential, as though he had been granted only a brief span to complete his life's work.

Even the royal family seldom saw him now. Baldur deliberately avoided seeing or speaking with the royal maiden, and in the evenings, when the candlelight fell upon the high brow of the savior of Atlantis, after the officials and clerks of the central office had gone home, one might have seen how Baldur Wieborg rested his powerful head in his slender hand, gazing absently at the small flame of his candle.

It was also visible that the features of the Count no longer bore the radiant youthfulness that had once made Baldur the easy darling of all hearts. A

faint, weary sadness often flickered about the fine, curved mouth — the expression of a painful foreboding.

Warga Gadirus!

Through fidelity he would perish.

He often pondered whether his life would truly run its straight course to the end — whether his loyalty to the beautiful gardener of Urd was not a kind of madness. Baldur had so thoroughly accustomed himself to subordinating all his thoughts to one question — what benefit the Empire might draw from his actions — that every time doubt arose, he was compelled to recall the deep effect that his marriage to his loyal companion Warga Gadirus would have among the people.

For if he, the pure-blooded Ase, whose childhood had been spent even in the harsh regions of northern Thule, were to wed a woman who was only a recognized Ase — that is, of mixed blood — then this act would be understood symbolically for what it truly was: an open affirmation of his own law, the law that had granted to the citizens of Atlantis their unity as a people.

No one would then dare to say that the Count proclaimed noble ideals for others but himself avoided descending into the lowlands — that he was, after all, nothing but an arrogant, race-proud Northman.

In the half year following the passing of the ill-fated star Heldung, Baldur Wieborg had repeatedly made inquiries with the constitutional scholar Weeling Gadirus as to whether Warga was able to receive visitors. He had even written to Gadirus, asking whether he could count on his approval if he were to seek Warga's hand in marriage.

But up to now, the scholar had deflected, taking refuge behind the opinion of the family doctor, who deemed any discussion of the matter—and even a visit at this time—completely inadvisable.

The beautiful gardener of Urd could no longer leave her bed; at best, she sat for a few hours a day in an armchair in the grassy little garden behind her father's house by the canal, watching the fish or reading the lectures of Baldur Wieborg, which her father faithfully brought her from the university.

All this the Count was well aware of. News from the house of Gadirus had since become scarce. The stargazer Odil had married and was living again with his young wife at the observatory of Agni, having refused all honors and distinctions that the High King had wished to bestow on him. Sometimes he would say to his friend Baldur, "I've received so many honors and offices from

the Papas in Urd that they hold no appeal for me anymore. Besides, you know as well as I do that they can't give me anything I don't already possess."

Around Count Wieborg it had grown lonely. He shared the fate of all those who bring happiness and talent to the cold heights of success, and Baldur suffered under this cold loneliness as only a warm-blooded man can suffer whose heart yearns for love and to whom the only echo is the small word: fidelity.

Slowly, the blond head of the much-envied man sank onto his folded arms, his powerful shoulders shook, and the candle fell from the brass candlestick, rolled across the table, and went out.

There, in the sober solitude of his empty night office, Baldur Wieborg wept like a foolish boy over lost happiness. No human eye saw the most powerful man in the realm of Atlantis writhing in the endless agony of his pressing thoughts; no one quietly sat down next to him and waited with patience and deep understanding until the storm had passed. Oppressive silence dripped, like a different, inaudible clock, through the cool colonnades of the imperial offices; only through the open windows did the gurgling and rippling of the canal water penetrate the massive walls. From far away, perhaps from a garden beyond the ring canal or even from the park of the Allfather's estate, the nightingale's song echoed with a melancholy resonance. Outside, Atlantis' spring was calling to the lonely man.

Slow, heavy footsteps sounded from afar; heavy bronze doors closed with a clang, ringing like deep bells. The Count straightened up, reached for the lighter, and lit the extinguished candle again. The night patrol was making its rounds through the offices, checking to see if all the lights were out. The man was used to Baldur Wieborg working late, so he passed by with a clear "Good evening, Count," and disappeared among the deep shadows of the colonnades. Again, metal doors slammed shut, and the footsteps faded away.

The lonely man pushed back his chair and stood up.

Beneath the window, a small galley glided by; one could hear the sound of the oars and the quiet singing of its passengers. Lovers were rowing through the spring night of Atlantis. Baldur Wieborg nestled into the deep, cold embrace of the window and listened to the fading song. He knew it. When had it been that he had sung it too? That was long ago—back in Thule, the farm boys sang it on the timber-framed homesteads, and there he had sung along, not knowing what it meant, for he was just a child then.

How happy were the people who were not Counts of the Realm.

With a sigh, he turned away from the window and walked with hesitant steps toward his desk. There lay the draft law for the borderlands. Here the difficulties were minor, since the Marches were undisputed imperial territories. The state-kings therefore did not need to be consulted.

Why did the law seem so indifferent to him today? Had it not been brought about through long, faithful labor? Had it not passed through the hands of the Empire's foremost jurists? Why then did it now feel so dull?

Baldur Wieborg smiled. He knew very well why. The night had enchanted him—the spring that called to him outside, the crying bird, the singing lovers in the little galley.

Was it really only six years ago that, as an Asgard soldier, he had climbed through Heunig Schulde's trapdoor into the garden of the Allfather estate to the royal maiden? Now no one waited behind the hedges out of those great youthful adventures. Fate had decided otherwise.

Tomorrow, at the break of dawn, he would go on foot to Warga Gadirus. Loyalty awaited!

With slow, uncertain steps Baldur Wieborg approached the door. Then he unlatched it and glanced into the empty, curving corridor, dimly lit from section to section by the faint glow of oil lamps. Indecisively, the Count of Atlantis stood gazing ahead, and again a fleeting light flickered across his broad, living features. At last he made up his mind, extinguished the candle on his desk, and left the office.

The Asgard guard in the silver-gleaming vestibule snapped to attention as the tall figure of the mighty man emerged from the bronze door bearing the victory rune of the northern people. With a friendly nod, Baldur Wieborg passed by, climbed the steep stairway to the first floor with quick steps as though he knew no weariness, crossed the flower-scented terrace where stood the little house he still occupied, and walked toward the metal gate of the armory. The Asgard sentry silently unlocked it and let the Count enter. The gate thudded shut behind him.

Baldur Wieborg stood in the darkened weapons hall of Asgard. For a moment he listened into the darkness, then called out with his resounding voice—bright as a trumpet blast that ran around the vast rotunda and came back like a malicious echo from both sides:

"Heunig Schulde, the key!"

The effect of the shout was tremendous. Not far from Baldur Wieborg, a man tumbled from his bed, leapt up with a terrible curse, and began rustling

about somewhere. A single glow-worm of light suddenly flickered on; a ring of keys clattered; and shuffling footsteps drew near. Once the little light vanished behind pillars and stacks of weapon tunics and laundry, and then it flared brighter than before. Finally Heunig Schulde stood before the Count and lifted a small lantern to his face.

"By Allfather's lightning! It's Wieborg!" burst out the old man — but he quickly corrected himself and said,
"The Count, the Count himself!"

"Good evening, Herr Schulde," said Baldur kindly. "Do you have the key to the trapdoor?"

"No, but I'll fetch it right away. I only have the other keys here," replied the quartermaster eagerly, and hurried off with the unerring instinct of one who knows his domain by heart, soon to stand once more before Baldur Wieborg.

"Wait, my lord Count — I'll go ahead," said Herr Schulde. "I've covered the stairs with old helmets. The steps haven't been used since you ceased to be an Asgard-soldier."

With a clatter the metal helmets rolled down the stairs, bouncing and ringing brightly on the stone floor. It was unheard of, really, how Herr Schulde handled the property of the realm that night — the same man who usually took it up with such delicate care in his broad hands.

"There, the stairway's clear now, my lord Count," Herr Schulde reported with a sigh of relief. "Here's the key. I've kept the lock oiled — it'll open easily."

With a pounding heart Baldur Wieborg climbed the wooden steps. He smiled at himself — that a sensible man, the highest officer in the Empire after the King himself, should be committing such foolishness, sneaking behind the hedges of the Allfather's garden to dream of old days and lost happiness.

Quietly, the key turned; the trapdoor yielded under the strength of his arm — and then Baldur Wieborg stood, breathing deeply, beneath the starry vault of the Atlantean sky.

Black and silent, the bushes and trees stood round him in a circle; only in the distance sang the nightingales. Perhaps it was one of those very singers from the Allfather's garden whose song he had heard earlier down in his cold office.

How often had the royal maiden waited for him here! Right beside the trapdoor Armane had always sat, waiting for her playfellow, and her jubilant cry — "Heunig Schulde, the key!" — echoing his own call from below, still rang faint and far in his ears, though all was now as still as the bottom of the sea.

Silent and upright, Baldur Wieborg stood beneath the stars. From far off, beyond the Allfather's estate, came the soft strains of many harps. King Wittmund Ase Torgaard had ordered his harpists — the finest in the realm — to play. Like yearning and lament, the harmonies streamed through the quiet garden of the Allfather's domain, and the lonely man behind the sleeping hedges drank in the sounds with parted lips.

And as he still stood listening, his head tilted back, his bright eyes raised to the stars — something happened that seemed like an unreal enchantment.

Two slender, soft hands slipped from behind around Baldur's cheeks and drew his head back further until it rested on a shoulder. For the space of a heartbeat his breath stopped — then he turned, his arms closed around a slender figure, soft lips pressed against his own, and instead of the thousand stars of the night sky, two beloved eyes looked into his, eyes he knew too well. Though only the faintest reflection of distant suns glimmered in them, it was enough for Baldur to know they were the eyes of his royal maiden, Armane.

Had he not, in some hidden corner of his heart, hoped that it would come to this — just as it had now? Had he not, with all the force of his lonely heart, called for it?

To think — not to think! To be, for once, not the Count, upon whose will and strength a great empire depended. To drink, for one hour, of forgetfulness — forgetfulness of the thoughts of honor and fidelity.

Fidelity was a curse. Honor, a fetter. Only for one hour did he wish to cast it all off — one hour to be dishonest — even if it shattered him within.

And his young, strong arms wound about the beloved as in inescapable bonds — she whom he had loved, always and endlessly, whom he had never been able to forget amid toil and peril. Wordless, in wild, foolish tenderness, the two who belonged together since they had first met kissed, their seeking fingers stroking through fair hair, caressing neck and chin — and beneath the silent stars, amid the still hedges, the lovers savored the first sweetness of a thirsting love.

At the first light of dawn, Amenor Lochi sat behind the stone balustrade of the townhouse belonging to the late spiritual councilor Holmer Wode on Asgard Street — and waited. He waited with the patience of a man whose entire life had become hatred.

When the sun rose and the first people of Atlantis opened the doors of their homes, the Venerable Father would leave the house quietly through a side entrance and step into the half-dark street, returning to Urd by routes different from those used by ordinary citizens. Sometimes the Papas lay in wait for several days in a row, his black eyes fixed ceaselessly on the tunnel gate of the Asgard.

Baldur Wieborg had often ridden past — with the armor clasps gleaming on his broad chest and the helmet on his proud head. When the Count passed by alone or with his retinue, the Venerable Father had always lowered his drawn bow. The arrow must not by chance strike one of the three brass rings — not yet.

So he waited on. Endlessly waiting. The hour of the High Sun Gate would come.

That day, too, Amenor Lochi had planned to leave at dawn. It seemed the Count was not riding out again.

The priest had already risen from his hiding place behind the rooftop balustrade and was about to carry the bow and two arrows down into the empty house when he saw the Asgard guards at the King's Bridge move swiftly to the gate pillars. The bronze rims of their shields clanged against their belts, and the eagles on their helmets flashed in the light.

Count Wieborg was leaving Asgard on foot!

Amenor Lochi silently crouched down again, his body pressed behind the parapet, his black eyes burning with hatred as they fixed on the bridge. The Count had acknowledged the salute of the guards with a raised hand and now walked with bowed head under the archway of the canal bridge between its two short towers. What burdened this man so deeply that he did not stride with the proud, upright bearing that usually marked him?

Even the Venerable Father noticed this, preoccupied as he was with darker thoughts. A wild joy flickered through the priest. Wieborg was unarmed. No chain of armor enclosed the broad chest above his tunic; no helmet shielded his neck. With dreadful tension, the ambusher stared at the approaching figure of his hated enemy. Step by step, slowly and thoughtfully, Baldur Wieborg walked down the middle of the street, as though, for once, he allowed himself the leisure of reflection.

The aging priest's heart pounded so violently against his ribs that he had to press both hands to his chest to steady it. Soon Baldur's firm, even

footsteps resounded beneath the walls of Holmer Wode's house. The priest drew himself together.

If it did not happen now, it would never happen.

The bow rose above the line of the parapet. The arrow wavered uncertainly, pointing at the slowly retreating back of the Count. The bow sank again.

But in the fraction of a heartbeat, it lifted once more — steady this time, guided by hatred.

Baldur Wieborg heard the faint hum of the bowstring and began to turn — but then a stabbing pain like a lightning bolt struck him in the back. Darkness fell around his mind as swiftly as night itself, and he had no time even to form the thought of where the unkind messenger had come from — the one who had pierced his northern heart with a poisoned barb.

The Count sank to his knees, slowly and almost naturally; then he fell forward, propping himself once more with his hand before lying still — face down — the same face that for so many in Atlantis had been the joyful image of spring.

"Spring has had its time," said the Papas of Urd from the roof of Holmer Wode's house.

He cast one glance at the motionless form of his mortal foe, then left the attic. He stepped into the street, carefully locked the house, and walked at a measured pace toward the side canal, where his small galley waited. From Baldur's back jutted the arrow, and when a faint morning breeze passed over him, the feathers at its end trembled like tiny, cheerful flags.

A door opened.

From the depths of a kitchen, a woman's voice called out. Then a baker's boy stepped into the street, still drowsy, arranging the small loaves in his basket before slinging it with a practiced motion onto his arm and turning toward the city.

Coming toward him was the old Burgrave Herbing Ase Kopping, who, at the turn of the year, had asked and received his discharge from the High King, yet still appeared every morning at the War Office out of old, faithful habit to sign documents. The two — the old soldier and the baker's boy — met at the spot where a silent man lay on the cobblestones, as if asleep.

And as the baker's boy approached with quiet unease, he suddenly heard the old man roar like a wounded beast, and saw him fall to his knees beside the still figure. The Burgrave's cap rolled across the pavement, and his snow-white hair streamed around his flushed, red cheeks. With both hands, he lifted the dead man's head and turned it halfway over.

"Baldur, my boy — my dear boy!"

Baldur Wieborg had never known, in all his life, how deeply the old man had loved him. When a man is a soldier, and the other is as well, such things must never be shown. One must, for reasons of discipline and pride, pretend as if…

And now Herr Kopping howled upon the hard stones of Asgard Street — so loudly that people threw open their windows and leaned out, that doors flew open everywhere and alarmed citizens came rushing into the open.

In a short time the street was black with people — citizens and workers, sailors and soldiers, craftsmen and builders — and although the crowd pressed toward that single point where Baldur Wieborg, murdered, lay upon the cold stones, a deep and terrible silence hung over the city.

Softly it went from mouth to mouth, whispering through the cracks of still-closed doors, flitting across the still waters of the canals, through the wide squares of markets and parks — that Baldur Wieborg, the darling of Atlantis, the springtime of the new Empire, had been cowardly murdered.

On a thousand galleys and boats, the flags sank to half-mast; black cloths unfurled from open windows and clung to stone walls and towers; and when at last, high upon the Allfather's estate, the great imperial flag with its radiant solar emblem was slowly lowered and halted halfway up the mast, a single, mournful cry went up through the entire city:

Baldur — the Spring of Atlantis — was no more.

From the signal stations of Agni and Urd, the gathered sunbeams flashed their bright, speech-like lightning over countless fire-ships and war galleys to the message posts in Lipore, Antianyu, and Paardegatt, to Harvesum and Acora, Schoongard and Aargund. They shot across to the mainland provinces of the Border Marches, startling the governors — some at the close of day, others whose lands still lay wrapped in deep night.

Whispering, the wind carried the news of mourning across seas and lands; sighing, the waves of the Atlantic Ocean took the bitter words of Baldur's death into their wet arms.

And ever since, when northern men sail upon the sea, they hear the old song that will not die — they hear it as a distant legend, as an immense sorrow that falls upon bright and noble souls — and they tell each other what they have heard: upon the deck of the ship, by the hearth, beside the flickering campfire — they tell it again whenever another great, good man falls to the murderer's steel:

The legend of Baldur — whom Loki slew.

Edmund Kiß

Instead of an Afterword

Here follows the report on Atlantis by the great Greek philosopher Plato, which he set down in 365 B.C. in his dialogues Timaeus and Critias.

Using the translation by Otto Apelt, volume 179 of the Philosophical Library (Leipzig 1922), published by Felix Meiner.

I wish to tell this old story which I heard from an old man. Critias was then, by his own account, nearly ninety years old, and I about ten; it was during the boys' festival of the Apaturia, which was celebrated in the usual way—the fathers offering prizes for the best recitation of poems. Among many others we boys recited verses of Solon, which were still rather new at that time. Then one of our phratores remarked—whether he truly thought so or simply wished to flatter Critias—that Solon seemed to him to possess the greatest wisdom and also the highest nobility among all poets.

The old man—I can still see him before me—was greatly pleased and replied with a smile: "Yes, my dear Amynandros, surely he would have become at least as famous as Homer, Hesiod, or any other poet, had he not practiced poetry only incidentally but, like the others, devoted his whole diligence to it. And if only he had completed the tale which he brought back from Egypt! But he had to leave it unfinished because of the internal unrest and all the other calamities he found upon his return."

"What sort of story was that?" asked the other. "It is the story," said Critias, "of the greatest and most rightly celebrated deed ever accomplished by our city; but because of the long lapse of time and the death of its heroes, its tradition has not come down to us."

"Tell me from the beginning," said the other, "what Solon heard and reported as credible, and from whom."

"There is in Egypt," began Critias, "in the Delta, at the point where the Nile divides, a district called Sais, and the largest city of this district is also Sais, birthplace of King Amasis. The inhabitants of the city hold as their foundress a goddess who in Egyptian is Neith, and in Greek, as they say, Athena; therefore they are great friends of the Athenians and, in a sense, of kindred stock. When Solon came to them, he was honored highly, and when he made inquiries about antiquity from the priests especially versed in such matters, he found that no one in Hellas had even an inkling of those things.

Once he wished to draw them into speaking of the earliest times, and began telling them the oldest traditions known in Greece—of Phoroneus, said to be the first man, of Niobe, and how after the Flood Deucalion and Pyrrha were the sole survivors. He traced the genealogy of their descendants and tried, by

reckoning the years belonging to each name he mentioned, to calculate the periods. Then one of the priests, a very old man, exclaimed:

'Solon, Solon, you Hellenes are ever children; and an aged Hellene there is none!'

'Why do you say that, what do you mean?' asked Solon.

'All of you are young in soul,' replied the priest, 'for you hold no ancient opinion derived from old tradition, nor any knowledge hoary with age. The cause is this: many times and in many ways have humankind perished, and will yet perish again—most often by fire and by water, yet by countless other causes as well. What is told among you of Phaëthon, the son of Helios—how once he yoked his father's chariot, but being unable to keep to his father's path burned all things upon the earth and was himself struck down by lightning—this sounds like a fable, yet the truth within it is the shifting of the heavenly bodies that revolve about the earth and the periodic destruction of what is on earth by a great fire. In such times the dwellers in mountains and high, dry regions suffer most, whereas those by rivers and seas fare better. But we are preserved by the Nile, our savior in every distress.

'When, on the other hand, the gods flood the earth with water to cleanse it, only the herdsmen and shepherds on the hills survive, while those of you who dwell in cities are swept into the sea by the rivers. In our land, however, water never falls from heaven upon the fields, then or at any other time; rather it is so arranged that it rises from below and spreads upward over them. For these reasons, whatever has happened among us is preserved and considered the oldest. In truth, wherever excessive cold or heat does not hinder, mankind has always existed in greater or lesser numbers. All events among you, or among us, or elsewhere within our knowledge—whatever is noble, great, or noteworthy—have from the earliest time been recorded in our temples and thus kept safe. But among you and other nations the art of writing and all civic life have only just reached a certain stage of development when, after the lapse of a period, once more like a recurrent disease the flood of heaven falls upon you, leaving alive only those who are illiterate and ignorant. Thus you are always, so to speak, young again, knowing nothing of what occurred in ancient times among us or among yourselves.'

At least, dear Solon, your genealogies—as you have just recited them—differ little from children's fairy tales. You know only of a single flood, though many others came before it; and you are unaware that the finest and most noble race of men once lived in your land—of whom you and all the citizens of your present state are descendants, a small remnant of that people having survived. All this is unknown to you, for your forefathers lived through many generations without the use of writing.

Once, before the greatest destruction by water, the state that is now called Athens was the most warlike and possessed the best constitution in every respect; to it are ascribed the noblest deeds and the best institutions of all known under the sun. Solon expressed his astonishment at this and earnestly begged the priests to tell him in full the ancient history of his city in proper order.

The priest began: “Nothing shall be withheld from you, Solon; I will tell you everything—for your sake, for the sake of your state, and above all for the sake of the goddess who took possession of both your state and ours, reared and educated them: yours a thousand years earlier, having received from the Earth-goddess Ge and the Fire-god Hephaestus the seed from which your people arose, and ours later in the same way. According to our sacred records, the establishment of our state is eight thousand years old. Thus your fellow citizens came into being nine thousand years ago. I will briefly recount to you their constitution and their glorious deeds; we can discuss these in detail another time at leisure with the aid of the writings.

You may imagine their constitution by looking at ours. For you will find many examples of your ancient institutions still preserved among us today: a separate caste of priests, then the class of artisans, each practicing their craft by themselves and not with others, and the herdsmen, hunters, and farmers; finally, you will have noticed that the warrior caste here is distinct from all the others, and that by law their sole duty is the care of military affairs. Their weapons were the spear and the shield, which we first adopted from the peoples of Asia—taught to us by the goddess, just as she had first taught them to you in your land.

You also see, no doubt, what care our legislation from its very foundations has devoted to the cultivation of the mind: from all the sciences concerned with the cosmos down to divination and medicine, the divine arts, it has selected what is useful for human life and made these sciences and all related knowledge its own.

With this entire order and constitution the goddess first founded your state, choosing the place of your birth with regard to the happy mixture of the seasons prevailing there, as being most suitable to produce wise men. Since the goddess loves both war and wisdom, she chose the place that would most likely produce men akin to herself and settled it first. So you dwelt there under such a constitution and other good institutions, excelling all other peoples in every virtue—as might be expected of descendants and pupils of the gods.

Among all the great deeds of your state, which we read with admiration in our records, one stands out above all in greatness and heroism. Our writings tell of a mighty power that was once checked by your state, when it arrogantly marched to war against all Europe and Asia from out of the Atlantic Sea.

For in those days the sea there was still navigable; before the mouth which you call the ‘Pillars of Heracles’ lay an island larger than Asia and Libya combined. From it one could then pass to the other islands, and from the islands to the entire opposite continent which indeed surrounds that sea that is rightly so named. For all that lies within that mouth appears but as a bay with a narrow entrance, while that outer sea truly deserves the name of ocean, and the land along its shores, in the truest sense, the name of continent.

On this island Atlantis there existed a great and wondrous royal power, ruling not only the whole island but also many other islands and parts of the mainland. Furthermore, their dominion extended over Libya as far as Egypt and over Europe as far as Tyrrhenia. This power once gathered all its forces together and attempted to subjugate at a stroke both our land and yours, indeed all the territory within the straits.

Then your state displayed its strength and valor before all mankind: surpassing all others in courage and skill in war, it led the Hellenes, but later, after the defection of the others, was compelled to rely on its own power alone. Undaunted by the utmost peril, it finally overcame the invading enemy and set up trophies of victory, preventing the enslavement of those who had not yet been subdued, and became the noble liberator of all within the gates of Heracles.

Afterwards, however, there occurred dreadful earthquakes and floods, and in a single grievous day and night all your warlike race was swallowed up into the earth, and likewise the island of Atlantis sank into the sea. Therefore the sea in that region is now impassable and unexplored, for the accumulation of mud caused by the subsidence of the island has made it an obstacle impossible to cross.

Above all, let us recall to mind that nine thousand years have passed since, as was said, that war took place between the peoples outside the Pillars of Heracles and those dwelling within them, of which I am now about to give a detailed account. Over the one side your state held sway and brought the war to an end; over the other ruled the kings of Atlantis. This island—larger, as mentioned, than Asia and Libya combined—was swallowed by earthquakes and left behind an impassable, muddy shoal that blocks any who would venture to sail to the ocean beyond.

Now, in the nine thousand years that have passed since that time, many great floods have taken place; and the earth which during those events was washed down from the heights did not, as in other regions, accumulate in heaps, but was each time carried off all around and vanished into the depths. Thus, as happens with small islands, only the bones of the wasted body remain, so to speak, compared with the land of that time: for the rich and soft soil has been washed away, leaving only the bare skeleton of the country.

In those ancient days, when the land was still intact, its mountains were high and covered with earth, and its plains—those now called stony ground—were full of rich soil. The mountains bore thick forests, of which clear traces still remain; for now, indeed, only a few mountains yield food for bees, but it is not long since there still stood roofs made from the timber of trees once felled there as beams for the largest buildings, and well preserved. The soil also bore many lofty fruit trees and provided the herds with abundant, unfailing pasture. Above all, the rains of the year brought great fertility; for the water did not, as it does now, run off the bare surface into the sea, but the deep, rich earth absorbed and stored it in its clayey depths, then let it flow down from the heights into the valleys, supplying everywhere abundant springs and rivers. Of these, there still remain sacred memorials at their ancient sources, proving the truth of what is now told of them.

Such, then, was the nature of that once fertile land, cultivated by true husbandmen worthy of the name—men devoted wholly to agriculture, pursuing the right, and well endowed by nature. For they enjoyed the best soil, the richest irrigation, and, as to climate, the most fitting alternation of seasons.

Now let us describe, in turn, the conditions that existed among their adversaries, and how things first arose and developed among them. I trust that my memory will not fail me in recalling what I heard as a boy, so that I can relate it accurately to you, my friends. But I must first add a small explanation, so that you will not be surprised that non-Hellenic men bear Hellenic names—you shall hear the reason for this.

When Solon wished to use this story in his poem, he made careful inquiries into the meaning of the proper names and discovered that those ancient Egyptians who had first written them down had translated them into their own language. Therefore Solon, in turn, took each name, sought out its meaning, and rendered it into Greek as it would sound in our tongue. These records were preserved by my grandfather and are still in my possession today; I studied them closely already as a boy. So do not be astonished if you hear names there similar to those here—you now know the reason.

And now, to our long narrative, whose beginning went something like this. We have already mentioned that the gods divided the whole earth among themselves, assigning larger or smaller portions, and founded their own sanctuaries and temples. To Poseidon fell the island of Atlantis; and there he settled the children he begot by a mortal woman, on a site of the following nature.

Along the sea coast, near the center of the whole island, there lay a plain, said to have been the most beautiful and fertile of all; at the edge of this plain, about 30,000 feet from the sea, was a low hill (a) open on all sides. On this hill dwelt one of the first men sprung from the earth, named Euenor, with

his wife Leucippe; they had a single daughter, Cleito. When the maiden had grown up, her father and mother died; and Poseidon, seized with love for her, united with her. He fortified the hill on which she lived by surrounding it with a powerful enclosure: he drew several concentric rings, two of earth and three of water, around the hill—each equally distant from the others in every direction—so that the hill became inaccessible to men, since at that time ships and navigation did not yet exist.

This hill, thus made an island, he furnished with every good thing; for such a task offered no difficulty to a god. He caused two springs to flow from the earth—one warm, the other cold—and made the land yield in abundance every kind of fruit.

Of male offspring, he begot five pairs of twin sons. He reared them, divided the entire island of Atlantis into ten parts, and gave to the eldest of the first pair the dwelling of his mother and the surrounding land as the best and largest portion—appointing him king over all the others. The rest he made rulers as well, each having authority over a multitude of men and a large territory.

He also gave each a name: the eldest, the first king, who then ruled, was named Atlas, from whom both the whole island and the sea took their name. His twin brother, who received the outermost part of the island stretching from the Pillars of Heracles to the region now called Gadeira, he named in the local tongue Gadeiros, in Greek Eumelos—a name from which that region took its later designation.

Of the second pair, one was called Ampheres, the other Euaimon; of the third, the elder Mnaseas, the younger Autochthon; of the fourth, the elder Elasippos, the younger Mestor; and finally, of the fifth pair, the elder Azaes, the younger Diaprepes. These all, and their descendants after them, dwelt for many generations upon the island of Atlantis, ruling also over many other islands of the Atlantic sea, and extending their dominion even to Egypt and Tyrrhenia.

From Atlas sprang a numerous line, not only highly esteemed in general, but maintaining the royal dignity for many generations, each eldest son inheriting it from his father. Thus they preserved such abundance of wealth as had never before existed in any kingdom, nor is likely to exist again. They possessed everything needed for life in both city and country.

For though foreign lands supplied them with certain things, most of what they required came from their own island. First, it yielded all the metals that are mined, whether solid or fusible, especially a certain kind of orichalcum—a metal now known only by name, but then more than a mere legend, mined in many places on the island and second only to gold in value.

The island also produced in abundance all that forests provide for the crafts of builders, and supported both wild and tame animals in great numbers. There were many elephants there; for besides ample food for all creatures in the marshes, lakes, and rivers, on the mountains and in the plains, there was equally abundant pasture for this largest and most voracious of species.

Moreover, all fragrant substances that the earth now brings forth anywhere—in roots, grasses, woods, saps, blossoms, and fruits—the island then bore in lavish plenty. It yielded also the "pleasant fruit" and the fruit of the field that serves us for nourishment, and all other foods we use and collectively call "vegetables." Further, it produced a tree-born plant that furnished both drink, food, and unguent, and finally the quickly perishable fruit of the orchard trees—meant for our delight and refreshment—all that we serve as dessert, the charming stimulants of the sated stomach. All these things the island produced in wondrous beauty and inexhaustible abundance, when it was still open to the rays of the sun.

Its inhabitants, having received such bounty from the earth, built temples, royal palaces, harbors, and shipyards, and ordered the whole land according to the following plan.

First, they built bridges over the canals surrounding their ancient citadel, thus linking it to the old royal stronghold. This citadel they constructed from the beginning on the very site of the god's and their ancestors' dwelling. It was inherited from one ruler to the next, and each sought to surpass his predecessor by enlarging and adorning it, until the residence at last presented a spectacle of astonishing grandeur and beauty.

They cut a canal from the sea, three hundred feet wide, one hundred feet deep, and thirty thousand feet long, leading to the outermost ring. Through this they made an entrance from the sea, like into a harbor, wide enough for the largest ships. They also pierced the earthen walls separating the ring-shaped canals beneath the bridges, creating passages broad enough for a single trireme. Each passage they vaulted with bridges, so that ships could pass beneath them, for the walls were high enough to rise above sea level.

The outermost ring-canal was eighteen hundred feet wide, and the earth belt following it was of equal breadth. The next ring-canal measured twelve hundred feet wide, and its earth belt likewise; the innermost canal, surrounding the island itself, was six hundred feet wide, while the central island on which stood the royal palace measured three thousand feet in diameter.

Around this island, the earth belts, and the one-hundred-foot-wide bridge, they built a stone wall, and at each passage toward the sea they erected towers and gates. The stones—white, black, and red—were quarried from the slopes of the central island and from the inner and outer faces of the surrounding

earth walls. Thus they created on both sides of the walls deep dockyards roofed by the natural rock itself.

For their constructions they sometimes used stones of one color, sometimes mixed differently colored stones for visual delight, giving the buildings a vivid natural beauty. The outermost wall they sheathed with bronze, the inner wall they coated with tin, and the wall of the citadel itself they overlaid with orichalcum, glowing like fire.

The royal seat within the citadel was arranged as follows.

In the center stood a temple dedicated to Cleito and Poseidon, which only priests were permitted to enter; it was surrounded by a wall of gold. Here the lineage of the ten princes had first been conceived and born. Each year, offerings of the first fruits from all ten provinces were sent there—one portion for each of the ten rulers.

There also rose a temple of Poseidon, six hundred feet long, three hundred feet wide, and proportionately high, built in a somewhat foreign style. The entire exterior of the temple was sheathed in silver, with golden battlements. Inside, the ceiling was of ivory adorned with gold and bronze; the rest of the walls, columns, and floor were plated with bronze. They set up golden statues within: the god himself, standing in his chariot and driving six winged horses, so large that his head touched the ceiling; around him, a hundred Nereids on dolphins, for such was believed to be their number. Besides these were many other statues dedicated by private individuals.

All around the outside stood the golden statues of the ten kings themselves, of their wives, and of all their descendants, together with many other votive offerings from both kings and private citizens of the city and from the lands under their rule. The altar corresponded in size and magnificence to the temple, and likewise the royal palace was worthy of the greatness of the realm and the splendor of the sanctuaries.

They also made use of the two springs, one warm and one cold, which flowed abundantly and provided water both pleasant to the taste and suitable for every purpose. Around them they built structures and planted appropriate trees, arranging bathing places, some open to the air, others enclosed and warmed for winter use—separate baths for the royal family, for the people, for women, and even pools for horses and draft animals, all fitted out suitably.

The outflowing water they partly channeled into the grove of Poseidon, where trees of every kind grew to remarkable height and beauty thanks to the richness of the soil; the rest they led by canals over the bridges into the outer ring-canals. There stood sanctuaries of many gods, numerous gardens, and exercise grounds—some for men, some for chariot teams—on the islands

formed by the earth walls. A special racecourse, six hundred feet wide and running around the entire larger island, was built for chariot racing. Around this course lay the dwellings of most of the royal guard. The more trusted of them were stationed on the smaller, inner earth ring nearer the citadel, while those of greatest loyalty lived within the citadel itself, near the palace.

The dockyards were filled with triremes and all the materials needed for their equipment, kept always in perfect order. Such, then, was the arrangement of the royal residence.

Beyond it lay the three outer harbors, and beyond them a circular wall beginning at the sea and running all around, thirty thousand feet distant from the great ring and harbor, ending again by the sea at the mouth of the canal. The entire intervening space was densely packed with houses. The harbor and its approaches teemed with ships and merchants from all parts of the world, and day and night alike resounded with the noise and clamor of a great seafaring city.

Thus, as far as I was told, were the city and the ancient royal seat arranged. I must now also attempt to describe the natural character and organization of the rest of the country.

The whole island, it was said, rose high above the sea, but the region near the city was entirely a plain, surrounded on all sides by mountains sloping down to the sea. It was perfectly level and uniform, longer than it was broad—about three thousand stadia in length, and two thousand in breadth at its center, stretching southward while protected from the north wind by the mountains.

The encircling mountains were said to have surpassed all that now exist in number, beauty, and size. They enclosed many populous villages, rivers, lakes, and meadows with ample pasturage for every kind of tame and wild animal, as well as great forests filled with trees of every variety, providing timber for all sorts of crafts.

Such was the natural character of the plain, whose development many successive kings had advanced. It was, for the most part, a perfect rectangle; whatever irregularities remained were corrected by a canal drawn all around it. The account of this canal’s depth, width, and length seems almost incredible for a human work, in addition to all their other labors: for it was said to be one hundred feet deep, six hundred feet wide everywhere, and ten thousand stadia long in total. It gathered the rivers descending from the mountains, passed along both sides of the city, and emptied into the sea.

From its upper course were drawn straight canals about a hundred feet wide, running across the plain, discharging again into the great canal that led to the sea; these were set at intervals of one hundred stadia from one another. By these waterways they brought timber from the mountains to the city, and

likewise conveyed all other products of the land, since cross-canals joined the longitudinal canals and reconnected the city with them.

The soil yielded two harvests each year—one in winter from the rainfall, and one in summer from the irrigation of the canals. As for population, it was ordained that each plot of land in the plain should furnish one military leader; each plot measured one hundred square stadia, and there were in all sixty thousand such plots. In the mountains and other regions the population was said to be countless, yet all were assigned, by their districts, to one of these plots and its respective leader.

Every six leaders were required to provide one war chariot, so that altogether there were ten thousand chariots for war. In addition, each had to furnish two horses and riders, a two-horse team without a seat carrying a lightly armed soldier with a small shield and a charioteer, also two heavy infantrymen, two archers and slingers, three stone-throwers and spear-throwers, and finally four sailors for the manning of 1,200 ships. Such was the military organization of the royal dominion; in the other nine states there were different arrangements, the discussion of which would lead us too far.

The constitution and government were ordered from the beginning as follows. Each of the ten kings ruled his own province from his city, having authority over its inhabitants and being master of most laws, empowered to punish or execute whom he wished. But the rule governing their mutual relations and the limits of their powers among one another was established by the ordinance of Poseidon, inscribed by the first men upon a pillar of bronze standing in the center of the island within the temple of Poseidon.

There they assembled alternately every five and every six years, that both odd and even numbers might share equal honor. In these gatherings they deliberated on matters of common concern and also examined whether any of them had violated the laws, and upon such transgressions they passed judgment.

When they were about to pronounce judgment, they first gave to one another this pledge of fidelity:

They held a hunt among the bulls that roamed freely within the sanctuary of Poseidon, using no iron weapons—only cudgels and nooses. They prayed to the god that they might capture a victim pleasing to him. The bull they caught they led to the bronze pillar and sacrificed it upon its top, directly above the inscription of the laws.

Upon that pillar, besides the laws, there was also an oath formula invoking mighty curses upon any who disobeyed. When, according to their custom, they had consecrated all parts of the bull to the god, they filled a mixing

bowl with wine and poured into it for each of them a single drop of the animal's blood, casting all the rest into the fire and purifying the pillar all around.

Then, dipping golden cups into the bowl, they poured libations into the flames and swore an oath to render judgment in accordance with the laws inscribed upon the pillar, to punish anyone guilty of impiety, and never in the future to transgress any of the precepts intentionally—neither to rule nor to obey otherwise than according to the laws of their divine father.

When each had taken this oath for himself and for his descendants, he drank, and then dedicated his cup as an offering to the temple of the god. Afterwards they turned to their meal and the care of their bodies. When darkness fell and the fires of sacrifice had died down, they clothed themselves in dark-blue garments of the finest beauty, seated themselves by the glowing embers of the sacrificial fire, extinguished all remaining lights in the sanctuary, and there, in the night, they received accusations and rendered judgment—whenever one among them charged another with breaking the law.

At daybreak they inscribed the judgments they had rendered upon a golden tablet, which they consecrated along with their garments as a memorial.

There were many other laws regarding the rights of the kings, but the most important declared that no one should ever bear arms against another; rather, they should all assist one another if anyone attempted by force to overthrow the royal lineage in any city. All decisions regarding war and other common matters were to be made jointly after consultation, as their forefathers had done, with the leadership and supreme command assigned to the house of Atlas. The right for a king to put one of his kinsmen to death belonged to him only if the majority of the ten approved.

This was the power that existed in those lands at that time—a power which, according to the legend, the god afterward turned against our own country, under the following circumstances.

For many generations they obeyed the laws and remained loyal to the divine element within them. Being of kin to the gods, they bore themselves with gentleness and justice; their minds were noble and sincere. In the face of all fortune's changes and in their dealings with one another, they showed moderation and wisdom. They regarded all possessions beyond virtue as worthless, and looked upon their vast wealth and abundance of gold as a burden rather than a blessing. Their prosperity did not intoxicate them nor rob them of self-control; clear in mind, they understood that these goods flourish only through mutual love joined with virtue, and perish when ambition and greed pursue them—dragging virtue down with them.

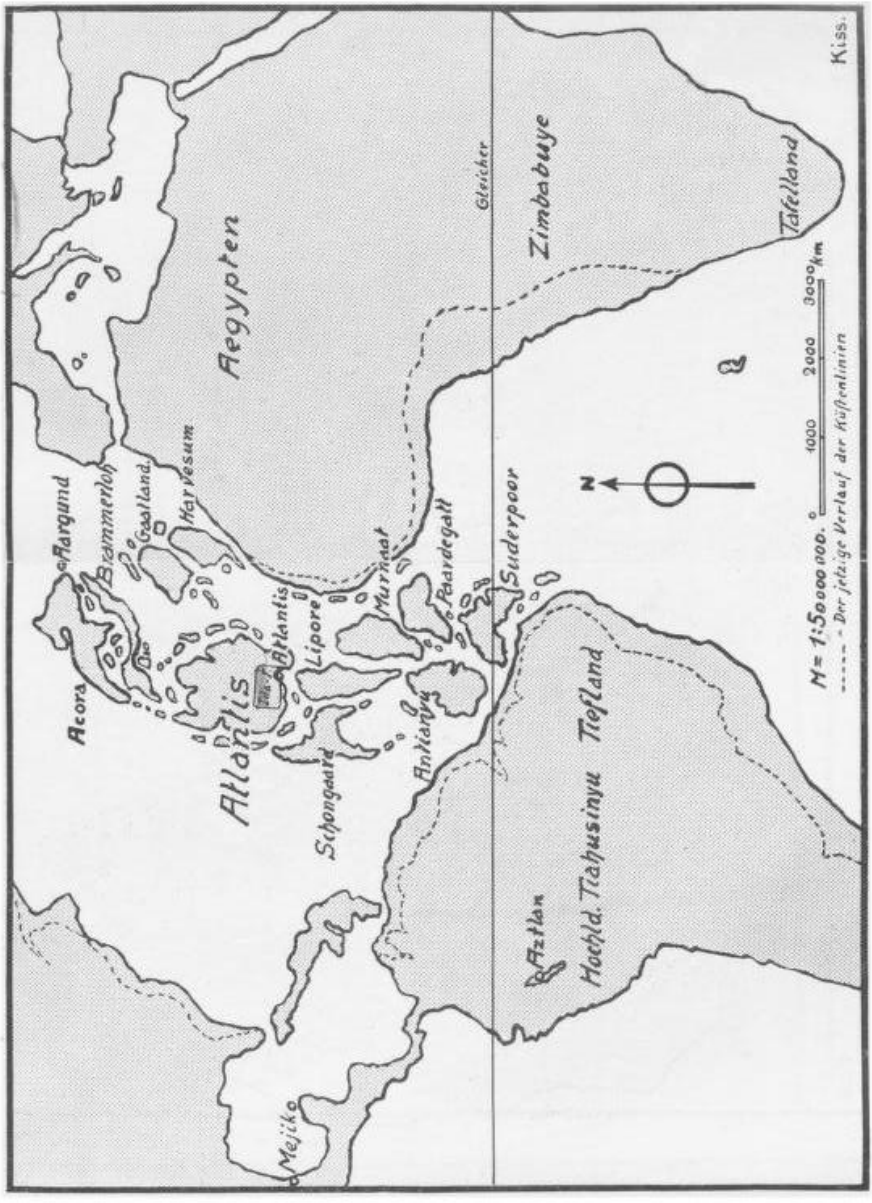
As long as these principles endured, and the divine nature within them remained strong, all that I have described before flourished in the best way. But when the divine portion in them began to fade through repeated and increasing intermixture with the mortal, and the human nature prevailed, they became unable to bear their prosperity and fell into corruption. Those who could discern the truth saw how shamefully they had degenerated, ruining what was most beautiful among all things of worth; but those unable to see what kind of life truly leads to happiness considered them then most blessed and noble—precisely when they were filled with unrighteous greed and power unjustly gained.

Then Zeus, the god of gods, who rules according to eternal law and sees all things, perceiving that this once noble race had fallen into such wretched depravity, resolved to chastise them—so that, brought to their senses, they might return to their former ways. He therefore gathered all the gods into their most venerable abode, which lies in the center of the universe and affords a view of all things that have part in generation, and there he spoke...

Plan of the City of Atlantis

a) The mountain that forms the innermost island, the royal seat
b) Temples and royal palaces
c) Harbors
d) Shipyards
e) Bridges
f) The passages between the ring canals
g) The outer ring canal
h) The outer earth belt
i) The middle ring belt
k) The inner earth belt
l) The inner ring canal
m) The wall around the royal castle
n) Sanctuaries of the gods
o) Gardens
p) Training grounds
q) Racecourse
1) Northeast branch canal, called "The Linden Tree"
2) The horticultural school
3) Commercial buildings
4) Public parks with playgrounds and racetrack
5) Hermit's house of the "Benevolent Earth Mother"

Map of the Ida Field with the capital Atlantis



Map of the Empire of Atlantis and its colonies

The Singing Swans from Thule

A Novel

By Edmund Kiß

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Edmund Kiß

Introduction

The continent of Atlantis, the cradle of a Nordic high culture and the motherland of a mighty empire, had sunk beneath the waves of the ocean that today bears its name. The global catastrophe was triggered by the capture of our moon, which brought about a reorganization of the distribution of the Earth's water and air masses, thus causing a complete transformation of climatic conditions. In this way, an age of flourishing on Earth came to an end, during which even the highest latitudes had been inhabitable.

From an outpost of the world empire, near the crest of the Andes—there, where excavations at Tihuanaku have revealed traces of Nordic culture—a few Atlanteans managed to save themselves. They bore their fate with the steadfast faith of the Northerners, who worshipped God as the "Ancient One," to whom they felt "brotherly" connected.

Under the seamanship of the astronomer of the Royal Observatory of Aztlan, Godda Apacheta, and under the leadership of the king—who, as Acora (Crown Prince), had resided in Aztlan at the time of the flood disaster—a galley heads north, toward the outpost of Thule, the "Greenland" of the moonless era.

Anyone who has read my novel "The Last Queen of Atlantis" knows that the young, deceased Atlanta Framer, whose heavy golden sarcophagus is carried by the galley, was betrothed to Godda Apacheta and only became the wife of his royal friend—and herself a queen—after she believed Godda to be dead. When, after four years of wandering, the royal couple met Godda again, all those involved kept silent, and no one but them suspected that the young Acora was the son of Godda Apacheta. On the royal galley, now sailing toward the Northland, we once again encounter the last of Atlantis in my new novel "The Singing Swans of Thule."

Edmund Kiß.

Migration of Birds

This is written by Godda Apacheta, the star-wise man of Aztlan, at the end of his long life, into the shimmering ring of the Milky Way.

Forgotten and blown away is the proud empire of Atlantis; it has become a legend, and a painful longing for the men and women who must struggle for their existence on a now-alien earth. Lost are the treasures of high culture and a proud past, lost too is the Northland Thule, which was the bubbling spring of Nordic strength and greatness. With walls of ice, the Ancient One has locked us out of our homeland, thinking perhaps he could bend his proud brothers! Now we have become migratory birds, like the great and small wing-bearers who fly south when the cold becomes too fierce, and who return to the borders of the Northland to nest, when the frost in Thule relents. They do not forget the old homeland. Year after year they return, for millennia cannot be wiped from the soul as easily as pale writing from a tablet. How dearly the poor wandering birds love their homeland! But in us, too, slumbers the heritage of millennia. We, too, love our homeland Thule and return. At the edge of the ice, we fight for our Nordic land—we, who have wings of the soul, we, the singing swans of Thule!

They were the first messengers from Greenland to meet us, as we steered north from the sunken islands of the empire—swans and geese in singing squadrons, and it sounded as if a thousand harps were being played when they passed over the mast of the royal galley at night. At that time, I did not yet know that they had fled from the ice that armored their home, and I gazed in amazement up at the dark, clouded sky, from which the metallic rushing of a thousand outspread wings sounded. They floated south, toward the sun, but I steered northward, into the cold fog, which, even at the heights of the Sky-bearer, at the entrance to the Midland Sea, shrouded the ship in ghostly veils.

To the right I knew the coast of the Iberian March of the sunken empire, and a little to the southeast lay the strait with its mighty, tower-like rock, upon which a strong garrison of the empire had been stationed. Perhaps it was still there, waiting for news and orders? Who could say?

That night, I doubted whether it was right to maintain the northern course. But I also doubted whether it was right to head for the narrows of the Midland Sea. Seldom in my life had I been so lacking in resolve as in the hours of that night, when the singing swans from Thule passed over me. From the north it blew cool, like a foreboding of great danger, but also from the path of the Sky-bearer, a voice called in my soul as a warning: Do not sail to the Midland Sea!

My hand nearly twitched to turn the rudder and run before the northwest wind, but the homeland Thule beckoned, the proud, rich Greenland called, and I held to starboard, close-hauled to the wind.

Yet throughout the whole night, the warning wings of the swans rustled.

For several days it had grown cold, and now I was freezing at the tiller, as if I were a pampered city dweller who can't stand the slightest draft. It reminded me of the high-altitude lake of Aztlan, which I had so often crossed at the helm of the galley. Ice needles stabbed my face, and the clammy northwest wind drove the blood from my fingers, which gripped the tiller. The old Atlantean galley was taking on a lot of water, since she was sailing close-hauled into the wind and because the heavy golden sarcophagus of my dead queen, Atlanta Framer, pressed the foredeck down too deeply into the waves. I saw the breakers swirl around the gleaming shrine, and then the bow would lift with a dull groan, letting the icy torrents rush along the starboard rail toward the stern. Each time the sharp bow crashed hard into the next wave, the fastenings that held the sarcophagus to the planks creaked, and the ship shuddered under the heavy weight on deck.

Up in the lookout by the mast crouched young Futbrand, still almost a child at fifteen. He was one of the tenant's sons from my estate, Apacheta, in the borderland of Tiahusinju in the Andes, whom I had brought with me when we had to leave Aztlan. He was probably no less cold than I, even though I had sent up some wool blankets and an old sailcloth cover for him, for his voice now sounded suspiciously like chattering teeth as he called down to me. He said singing swans were passing by next to him, and swallows—real little swallows—were landing in numbers beside him and even on him! They were so tired and tame, he could catch them with his hand. Starlings, too, had arrived and were sitting on the basket rim, very modest, and crowded against the wind-shadowed side of his perch. When he reached for the halyards and sheets, his hand brushed against the little balls of feathers, but they let him touch them, as if they were his friends.

I called up to him, telling him not to let himself be distracted and to keep a good lookout, for despite the hazy weather the night was not completely dark, as it so often had been before the fall of the realm. For before Atlantis sank into the waves of the sea, we did not yet know the moon, which now brightens the nights. Now, though, a faint brightness lay upon the sea, which seemed to come partly from the sky, but also from the greenish-glinting waves.

The flight of birds coming from the Northland filled me with an aching anxiety. It was spring now, and yet the birds came from Thule—as if fleeing from a fate too great for them to withstand. I did not yet know then that the feathered friends of the Nordic peoples flew back and forth year after year, in desperate restlessness—from north to south and back again, over and over,

tireless—because they could not believe that their paradisiacal homeland, where they had dwelt for hundreds of thousands of years, was now closed to them.

I myself knew our homeland, Thule, well, for twice in my life I had been there on missions of the empire—once in winter and once in summer—to complete sea charts that had been among the most important foundations of the empire's world-spanning trade. The winters in the Thule lands had then, before the fall of the realm, been mild and almost without snow, and the summer was like an eternal spring. Had there been land at the northern pole of the Earth, rye would have ripened there. But land was rare in the Thule seas—there were only islands, great and small—and the largest among them was Greenland, which in the native tongue of the North was called Grönland because a single green garden stretched there almost up to the polar regions: a granary of the empire like the famed Plain of Ida in the capital Atlantis itself.

Iceland lay farther up in the northern sea, only a few days' voyage east of Greenland, and bore its name because its fire-bearing mountains wore caps of ice, so that from afar one might believe winter reigned on that mountainous island. The Thule lands knew nothing of the harsh winters that were found at the southern pole of the Earth, upon the few inhabited islands of the realm.

If one sailed thirty days westward from Greenland across the Thule Sea, one came to Vinland—the famed garden of the empire—where the vine grew almost up to the pole, and which was especially well known to seafarers, for there, in that northern land, lay the magnetic pole of the Earth.

But if one sailed southward from Greenland, one reached in fourteen days' voyage Scotenland, rich in ores and black coal, with mild air and eternal spring. Twelve days' voyage east of Scotenland rose, from the cool Thule Sea, like a precious pearl, Norrland—the homeland of many of our great ones in Atlantis. The sunken empire had always sought and found its strength and renewal from that ancient homeland near the northern pole of the Earth.

All the birds that, on that night when I steered the last Atlantean galley northward, swept rustling over me had once been resident birds of the Thule lands—they had never left the northern home. The ceaseless whirring and murmuring in the foggy, icy air sounded uncanny. It would not end, and seemed to swell rather than fade away.

"Storks, Lord Godda! Storks!" cried the boy in the lookout. "A whole squadron just passed by—right beside my basket, on both sides of the mast!"

So even the beautiful black-and-white friends of our farmsteads in Greenland were abandoning their homeland, rushing past the galley in dense ranks on the opposite course. My heart grew very heavy. What could it mean? For a time I considered whether to have King Balder or the old Count Framer

awakened, but then decided to wait, since dawn could not be far off. With the coming of light the flight of birds would surely not cease, and then one could see with one's eyes what in the night had beat so eerily upon the gates of the ear.

"Light ahead, Lord Godda!" the boy called.

I was sailing close to the wind and making little headway, as I liked to do at night. The conditions on this newly made Earth were unfamiliar to me. I knew that ahead, toward the north, neither the sun could stand nor the moon, which had become our companion in the sky since the fall of the empire. I grew wary and brought the ship even closer to the wind, so that the galley nearly lost all way. It was well that I was so cautious, for only a few moments later a rough grating ran along the sides of the hull, as if the old galley were sliding through a street of crushed salt.

I let go of the tiller and went to the mast to loosen the gaff-halyard from the cleats and take the mainsail out of the wind's tension. The gaff came rushing down, and the sail flapped slowly and sullenly in the northwest wind. I knew that the scraping sound along the outer planks, together with the easing of the gaff, would serve as a wake-up call to those sleeping in the cabin below.

First came the old Count of the Realm, Framer of Akapana, the former lord of the fortress in Aztlan, up on deck. He had always been a light sleeper, and as always, when he came on deck, he muttered some very unpleasant words under his breath—more or less clearly—that is to say, I understood them, of course, because I knew them well. He assumed that I had run the ship aground and wanted to know why I had done so. I replied that this was not the case; on the contrary, we were still in the middle of the Atlantic, at least two days' sail from the Iberian west coast, and lying somewhat abaft the beam of the Road of the Sky-Bearer. I had struck the gaff because I wished to wait for daylight before continuing the voyage.

Framer of Akapana lifted his hooked nose suspiciously into the icy northwest wind, sniffed several times, and walked silently to port, where the verdigrised shields hung dripping with water. The royal galley rose and fell softly now in the heavy swell, creaking as though it were moving laboriously through fine desert sand—or, as I had thought earlier, through crushed salt. The count remarked that it was dreadfully cold—something I had had to endure all through the night!—and then listened upward. He heard the wings of the singing swans rustling. Now geese, too, began to cry, as they sailed invisibly over our heads.

Then the King came and offered me his hand in morning greeting.

"Frozen fists you have, my Godda," he said kindly and with concern. Indeed, my hands were red and stiff from frost, and I only now noticed the pain.

Almost all of them came up from the hold—the last of the realm of Atlantis—and in the dim light of the signal flames along the deck and mast they looked like uncanny elves emerging by night from the underworld. The women, sensibly enough, stayed below deck, though one says they are generally more curious than men. I was pleased by this trust of our female seafarers—or perhaps they were simply slower to ready themselves, needing light to do so. Artificial illumination had become a precious rarity among us spoiled Atlanteans.

The young knight Gerdung of Gaardepoort leaned far over the railing between two shields and retrieved something from the water that looked indeed like salt. But it was ice—and not even solid ice at that, rather something like slush, not yet fully frozen. The young man immediately threw his find onto the deck planks, for his hand burned as if it were fire.

We stood silently around the white-gray substance: the carpenter Saland, the old warrior Sarota, the worker Forsanti, the craftsman Luhre of Vinland, the knight Gerland of Tikina, Lord Gerdung of Gaardepoort, Friebe of Schoongard, Framer of Akapana, the King, and I. No one cared to speak aloud what each felt so eerily stirring in his soul. The little knight Gießel of Suderpoor pushed into the circle, for his small stature kept him from seeing, and the young Rabe of Guttenberg climbed into the shrouds to get a view from above of the marvel. The others, unable to see further, leaned over the railing—giant Wittewehr of Tamdilo, Lord Bilrung of Kalassa, Droger of Siminak, and Lord Henneke of Gaatland—and they all gazed at the crackling white slush, such as none had ever seen before. Wehle of Brammerloh and Geyer of Antianyu thrust their spears through the loose mass, then shook their heads and looked at each other.

The King ground the slushy ice underfoot so that water oozed out. He said that he really ought to show it to the Acora, but that the boy was below with the women in the hold and had no time. During the night, he explained, five children had been born—four boys and one girl—each more beautiful and healthy than the next. At least, so my mother had said, who was attending the women in labor. The young Acora Godda, however, was sitting among the maidens and listening to them tell how the infants had slumbered long in their mothers' soft wombs until they were grown enough to come forth into the light among the others.

For a while I forgot my worries and smiled—for my ship's crew had, in a single night, grown from fifty-one Atlanteans to fifty-six. And I knew that this was not all—that in the coming days and weeks, more children were expected. I told my royal friend that soon he could indeed present himself with a great people, and that it was already worthwhile for him to wear the crown of the sunken realm.

"The sea is white—all around!" shouted the boy from the basket. The King called up, asking how the watchman Lutbrand was faring in the bitter cold.

"Hail, my King! I'm freezing!" rang out the clear young voice from the mast, and we all laughed at that unflinching tone, which trembled a little from cold, but certainly not from fear.

It was, in truth, an uncanny sight in the dim light of dawn. None of us had ever seen the sea frozen in these latitudes; it was entirely new to us, and whatever is new arouses at least unease. It was as though the royal galley were floating in a thick white mash. Slowly and sluggishly the ship heaved through the long, stiff waves, which, in contrast to those of previous days, had become smooth and low, though with the stiff northwest wind they ought to have been far higher. No breakers came over the bulwarks now, but instead there was a grinding, crackling murmur along the planks; at times, near and far, it sounded as though thin glass were breaking apart with a soft, brittle snap.

Now, as it grew almost day, the clouds tore open, and Heldung-Atlanta, my new star, stood in three-quarters fullness like a vast disk in the southern sky.

Lord Framer remarked that the moon looked much larger today than it had the last time we saw it—it must have been some fourteen days ago. I had to agree with the old gentleman. I had already observed several times that the slave-star of the Earth—our new moon—changed in size, but I wished to make more observations before pronouncing judgment. As an astronomer, I knew the laws of the orbital periods and velocities of the heavenly bodies, and the fixed relations between these and their respective distances from the Sun—or, in the case of slave-stars, from their master-stars, around which they revolved.

I knew that the distances of satellites from their master-stars were not always the same, and that their orbital speeds were greater near the star and slower when farther away. All this had been secure knowledge in the Atlantean observatories, based upon millennia of precise observation. It was self-evident to me that the newly captured wandering star, which we now called the Moon, would behave no differently than the two small slave-stars of our neighboring planet, the one that bears the name of the God of War.

My new star—the Moon—therefore moved in a very elongated orbit around the old Earth, because it had been captured by Earth's gravity only a few years before and had not yet had time to round out its course. I supposed that it would require many thousands of years to do so, and that the apparent change in its size would therefore remain a constant phenomenon for the time being. And since the Moon took about thirty days to make a revolution about the Earth, it followed that its appearance changed markedly every fourteen days—at one time very large, then again small. Of this mysterious companion I knew no more as yet. The sky seldom allowed unobstructed observation, and even then little

could be discerned of the surface of the captive wanderer, for a whitish, dazzling haze always wreathed the radiant globe, as though boiling vapor streamed from its body and veiled it all around.

With a smile I recalled that fever-journey, when the arrow of Cuzco at Akapana had pierced my eye, and the ancient brother in the heavens had carried me away across the ice fields of the new star. How long ago that was! And now it had almost become a legend.

The mist-wreathed lunar disk grew paler. From the east, from the Road of the Sky-Bearer, the young day announced itself with its comforting light. But what it revealed to us was not well suited to cheer our hearts. It showed us a landscape such as only a few among us had ever seen, on the highest plateaus of the royal Andes—only that the landscape here upon the Atlantic was incomparably grander and vaster. It was bounded not by close-pressed mountains, but by a horizon of immense span, and as far as the eye could reach stretched a glittering, whitish-gray plain, which seemed to breathe heavily beneath the rolling swell of the half-fettered ocean. An icy, numbing breath came from that dreadful field of slushy ice, which had caught our old galley fast in its viscous grasp.

Young men went below to fetch cloaks for old Lord Framer and for the King. In silence we stared at the dark squadrons of migrating birds that filled the sky to the horizon in shifting ranks. The swallows that had perched on the masts and yards took flight at once as soon as the new day's light fell upon them. In hook-shaped formations herons swept low over the ship; higher up, in slanted lines, flew ducks and geese, in tight ranks one behind another the divers. High in the heavens the storks sailed in endless rows; ibises flew southward in strange undulating lines, as if driven by pursuit. In dense, compact clouds starlings and finches darted past, and in irregular flocks the sandpipers and oystercatchers. And all around, scattered upon the slushy ice of the Atlantic, lay greater and smaller black and gray points: the victims of that terrible flight from the Northland—the great and the small fliers from Thule who had been unable to endure the struggle and had fallen, death-weary, upon the sea.

We looked at one another again, and not a word was spoken during the first hour of that day.

I had the sail completely eased and taken down, for there could be no thought of continuing the voyage for the present. Then I crouched in the wind-shelter of the golden sarcophagus of my Queen, who lay in the precious shrine in her final sleep, and let my eyes wander over the pale plain that groaned and cracked beneath the long waves of the Atlantic, as though suffering unspeakable pain beneath us.

Toward noon the squadrons of migrating birds thinned out, and gradually the vast white expanse of the sea grew empty. Heavily the galley labored in the viscous swell, and behind me I heard the bolts of the coffin creaking against the deck-planks. I thought that soon I would have to lower my Queen into the sea that bore the name of her sunken realm. For weeks the gnawing worry had not left me—that the massive golden coffin might bring disaster upon the ship, should heavy weather arise, as was to be expected on a voyage of many months. Through the ship's constant motion the bolts had loosened, and though I had had them tightened again and again, the wood itself was now giving way, and the fastenings no longer held.

I judged it best to make the decision at once, since the ship lay very still at the moment, so that we could dismantle the railing without danger to vessel or crew.

When we sat together after the midday meal, it was the King himself who proposed what I had already been thinking. Lord Balder had heard during the night the rending and creaking of the deck-beams and knew that his duty was to care for the living, not for the dead queen.

Before evening came, the heavy funerary shrine of my Atlanta Framer was rolled on wooden rollers to the ship's side. The galley heeled deeply as the coffin stood in the gap of the railing which the carpenter Saland had broken open.

The Acora Godda stood between the King and me, holding our hands. I looked into my noble friend's eyes, and Lord Balder nodded to me. No one was allowed to know that the queen had been my wife, and that the Acora was not the King's son but mine. Therefore I spoke the final words over the coffin as though I were only a vassal taking part, and not the nearest of kin:

"Rest in the peace of your sea, O Queen of the sunken realm!"

Our hands rose in salute. Slowly the heavy shrine slid downward, and the ice closed over it.

I think I have never held my head so high as on that day when, for the sake of the living, I gave my proud queen to the Atlantic Sea.

At night, after the carpenter Saland had closed the railing again, I lay wrapped in blankets beside my aged mother at the place beneath which, in two thousand depth-units, the happiness of my life rested and had vanished forever from the circle of the living. A precious, tender breath of God had gone out—a jewel of His abundance, who is prodigal, and grants even to the noblest no eternity, for His eternity is the return of the noble spirit in generations to come, not the endless duration of the single being.

Yet I also knew that the radiance of a noble soul can reach far beyond the succession of generations and thus attain a duration not given to every soul; and that our noble Atlantean lineage does not consist only of those now living, nor only of those who, in the chain of love, shall follow us, but chiefly of those who have been, whose nobility is both inheritance and command. This is the eternity of the Ancient One—the elevation of the soul from the nobility of the ancestors toward the hope of what is yet to come.

To our own soul the Ancient One gave the will to be divine by free resolve; and this is not bound to space or time, for the beyond cannot be measured by them. My son, the Acora Godda, who had long since fallen asleep below in the hold, trusting the one-eyed helmsman with the care of the ship—the only son of my only beloved—was to carry the chain into the future: proud, brave, and faithful, as his mother had been, and as—perhaps—the star-wise Godda Apacheta had striven to be.

"It was good that you did it," said my old mother. "It seems to me that the distress of the last Atlanteans is only now beginning."

I laid my arm around her shoulders, bowed by age, and smiled into her clear, gentle eyes, which shone from the pale, narrow face like two quiet guiding lights at the entrance to the home harbor.

"I shall remain with you for a long time yet, my Godda," my mother continued. "For a number of years I will share this hardship with you, because you are very lonely—so lonely that I often have deep concern for you."

"Mother, a man who bears duties such as mine carries the loneliness of his soul lightly upon his shoulders," I replied. Yet inwardly I had to smile at the courage of the old woman—for she was now ninety years old and still determined to share with me the struggle for life, for space, and for power, so that I would not be entirely alone! And she was right. Her love helped me through many a hard year that followed, and kept me from giving up the struggle of a predator's existence—a struggle that is never easy for a man of higher culture. She grew harder than I, but I knew she did so only to help me. In her soul rested the precious inheritance of our noble women: tenderness and love—gifts which, I believe, are a direct blessing from the Ancient One to his dearest friends.

That night the knight Gerland of Tikina took the helm watch, but I went below only late, for I wished to keep vigil on the stars. They had become rare, for clouds almost always veiled them, yet I needed them urgently to determine where on the Atlantic the galley now lay. I asked the young Marke to wake me if the clouds should part, even a little. Every patch of clear sky was precious to me.

I set out my measuring instruments on deck to have them ready at hand, and then went down into the cabin. But there a few young women were waiting for me—they wanted to show the one-eyed helmsman the newborn children. That I could not refuse, nor did I wish to, for like almost all men I am curious and am always amazed at how such ugly, tiny creatures later become such beautiful and orderly human beings—or disorderly ones, as the case may be.

Our little community of women and girls had lately not been on good terms with me, since I would not give them fresh water for washing or bathing. And now I could all the less afford to, for I did not know how long the royal galley would remain stuck fast in the white slush-ice. It might last a very long time indeed. Under the former conditions I had known, the voyage to the southern tip of Greenland would have taken no more than twenty days—but who could now, after the fall of the realm, say how the world in the north had changed? I already had a foretaste of those changes.

True, I possessed water for three times that duration, yet I remained relentless, insisting that sea water be used for washing and bathing—even though I myself suffered from how poorly that water served for cleansing. I went to inspect the supply of fresh water, which was in the care of a rower named Sarota, a soldier among the few survivors of the fortress Akapana on the highlands of Tiahusinju. I saw the guilty look in his eyes as he held up his clay lamp to show me into the barrels, but I said nothing and turned away. Before leaving the bilge room with its fresh-water casks, I told him not to leave them uncovered again, for just as much had evaporated as would have been needed to bathe the infants. Thus I could not grant the young women the water they wished for their children's bath.

"I knew you'd notice it, Lord Knight Godda," the man said. "But I think you too would have yielded if you had seen so many maiden's eyes pleading."

"If you could see the coming hardship as I see it, you would have remained firm," I answered rather sternly. "I will not relieve you of duty, because I know you and because you have always been reliable. That you failed this once is a matter of age. One should not judge others more harshly than oneself. Perhaps I too would have weakened." Then I climbed the ladder to the living quarters.

That night, there was no observing the stars—for the clouds grew thicker, and heavy snow began to fall, settling upon the slush-ice and covering all the dead fliers that had fallen from the migrating flocks. In the snowstorm, flocks of ducks and geese crashed down onto the deck, completely blinded and having lost all sense of direction. The young men of the crew were thus able to set about gathering up the exhausted birds and killing them. They were packed

on deck in layers of ice so that they would keep fresh, and I confess I was very glad to have in this way gained a welcome addition to our food supply.

I also had quickly made wooden tongs constructed, and with these the snow that lay a foot high around the galley and on the planks was brought in and melted in a special barrel—done in the bilge room without the use of fire, since it was warm there. In this way I obtained, over the next few days, even bathing water for our women. Sarota, however, had taken my warning to heart and became very stingy with the stores entrusted to him.

"How long will you stay here on the snow-field?" the little Acora asked me one day, as he stood with me at the rail and looked out over the vastness. He trusted me with all the power of the earth, for I was the helmsman. I told him we would soon be free of the ice, and that he should have patience.

But not only the boy grew restless. The King too, I could see well, looked day by day more anxiously into the gray snow-filled air—from which, at last, along with snow, rain began to fall. When that happened, my hope revived, for the cold had eased. And one night, perhaps eleven days after the galley had become trapped in the slush-ice, I reached open water again—and soon afterward, a clear, star-filled sky.

Count Framer and the King watched me closely as I worked the instruments. They were breathless with suspense as to what my position calculations would show. Forty-five days had passed since we left the Acoric Islands; therefore, allowing for our daily sailing speeds as recorded in the ship's log, we must now be on the latitude of the northern storm-bay of the Drudenmark.

My calculations took much longer than usual, for I had to repeat them several times, unable at first to believe the result. Again and again I set my stylus to fresh figures, again and again I put my eye to the measuring gaps of the instruments and recalculated. The result did not change. It was, and remained, correct.

King Balder grew uneasy and asked why I needed so much time today to determine our position. I replied that I had thought there must be an error in my reckoning, but had to admit that my determination was correct.

"We stand only five days' sail north of your Acoric Islands, my King," I said, heavily.

Lord Framer sprang up, almost in anger. Surely I meant forty days, not five! The galley, before the ice set in, had been running at tremendous speed before the stiff west and northwest winds. I must have miscalculated—or my instruments were defective.

But I could not help the old gentleman. We had sailed for thirty to thirty-five days virtually on the same spot.

When I said this, the King shook his head and declared it could not be; yet another thing was possible—namely, that the ice-drift, for reasons unknown to us, had moved southward, and that we had simply been carried along with it. Some immense flood or current must have flowed down from Northland, one so powerful that it had overwhelmed every forward motion of the galley.

"Perhaps your new star is to blame as well," said Lord Framer with friendly mockery— and he was greatly astonished when I agreed with him quite seriously. He himself had observed, I reminded him, how enormous the disk of the new Moon had appeared when we last saw it. The satellite had then been near the Earth, and by its increased gravity had drawn the tide—and with it the ice-fields—toward the Equator. I suggested that the current had since turned, and that we were now drifting northward again, because the Moon, moving away for the next fourteen days, was releasing the flood masses from its power. These waters, having been dammed up in the south, must now flow back northward.

"It has also grown pleasantly warm," the King nodded.

"That suggests that Godda Apacheta's reckoning is correct, and that we stand near the Acoric Islands. The wind comes from the southwest. Yet I see that in this way we shall not reach Greenland."

Framer—who longed for his northern homeland as we all did—grew wrathful and spoke of Aztlan and of his own hard endurance. That, he said, was the Thulean way. He insisted on holding the northern course. The new satellite Moon would not prove so dangerous, and with this steady southwest wind the breakthrough to Thule must be attempted once more. Did I not see that the galley was cleaving the Atlantic like an arrow? In Greenland, he said, our homeland awaited us!

Framer spoke the name of Thule-land—Grünland—in his Nordic tongue, perhaps to stir our longing hearts. He advanced weighty reasons that, at another time, would have made the King and me thoughtful. In the Sea of the Mid-Land, he said, there had been war when the realm went down. He reminded the King that his father had had to send strong battle-forces to Hellas to crush the freedom movement that had there won victories against the Empire. Whether that conflict still endured he could not know, but one would be sailing into a swarm of bees, without any real war-power, in a single aged ship that groaned at every wave. In Thule, on the other hand, there was secure homeland—no war awaited us there. Our blood-brothers would receive us with open arms, and we had surely earned some years of peace!

The King asked me whether I dared promise to bring the galley to Greenland within twenty-five days. When I said no, he gave his order briefly and firmly:

"We sail through the Strait of the Sky-Bearer to the Sea of the Mid-Land."

I raised my hand in sign of obedience. The old Count of the Realm did the same. He had once been a master of command, but he could also obey—that he now proved. For a while he watched my face mistrustfully, as if to see whether I mocked—but I did not—and the old man's eyes grew kind, even friendly. Yet he said sorrowfully that he would not see his homeland again; but he was a soldier of the King, and would die wherever he was ordered.

"The homeland? Thule?" the King laughed a little bitterly. "My old, dear Count, none of us shall ever see our homeland again."

"My royal lord is still young enough for that," said Framer of Akapana quietly. "I was thinking only of myself."

"Ask Godda Apacheta," replied the prince, turning away.

I confirmed the ruler's opinion and reminded Lord Framer of the vast migration of birds from the north that we had witnessed. All those feathered friends from Thule would not be fleeing southward unless Greenland, Iceland, Vinland, and Norrland were closed to them. If the ice had even advanced into the sunlit latitudes of the Sea of the Mid-Land, then Greenland now must lie rigid beneath ice and snow, sleeping its death-sleep—sealed to men and uninhabitable for beasts.

I did not doubt that a few solitary humans might perhaps manage, with great difficulty, to hold out in the old homeland; but as a land of culture, such as it once had been, Thule could no longer be considered. Therefore the only possible course remaining was to steer for the Strait of the Sky-Bearer, especially since the wind stood excellently for it, blowing almost directly from astern. By my reckoning we would need no more than five days for that passage, and already on the following night we could determine whether the current, as I suspected, was indeed running northward again.

Because the sun shone warmly from a nearly cloudless sky, I was not long alone at the helm of the galley. My mother sat beside me on a coiled rope, the King had a chair brought on deck and held the Acora between his knees. Framer of Akapana and Gerdung of Gaardepoort lay upon woolen blankets, gazing after the white clouds that drifted northward faster than we did. It almost seemed as though the air-masses about us were drifting northward as well! Marke, Wilbrand, Forsanti, and Luhre had brought their young wives and

children up on deck, so that the newborn people of the northern stock might for the first time feel the fresh wind of the Atlantic.

Our maidens sat side by side upon the great boom of the sail, stretching far out over the rail, and let themselves be rocked to and fro by the swaying, creaking timber. They looked very beautiful and full of joy—these fresh young beings in their clean garments and bright colors—and I felt keenly that they formed my deepest delight on this happy day, the day when we set our course toward the land, toward the narrow strait of the Sky-Bearer.

He who bears the heaviest responsibility and is condemned to loneliness in care feels such joy doubly—thrice over. The carefree laughter of the young maidens was an infinite balm; it streamed like a blissful current into my heart, long accustomed to burdens. My fingers, still gripping the tiller as always, tapped from time to time the rhythm of the cheerful songs that rang across the smooth deck of the royal galley.

And though I rejoiced at my sovereign's command—to make for the strait and sail into the Sea of the Mid-Land—yet an anxious foreboding would not leave me: that a danger awaited us there which I might not be able to master. Since I could find no reason for this unease, I tried to banish it. The earth, wherever we might go, was uncertain and full of peril—but perils must be overcome!

The infants drank at their mothers' breasts, and the beauty of God shone from the white skin of the women and the nursing children. It was no pride nor arrogance that made us hold our proud, fair race to be the favorite of the Ancient One. From the palest blond to the bright golden brown the braids of our women gleamed in the sun. The young Lutbrand, who had been in the basket atop the mast on that first icy night, lay stretched beside me, letting his sun-tanned body bathe in the warm air.

Thus sat the King—the last who ruled in Atlantis—in the midst of the last of his proud Nordic people. But these last bore the hope that it could not truly be the end of the men of Thule; that they would secure, with mind and sword, the place due them beneath God's warm sun—through hardship and misery to new greatness.

The long waves of the Atlantic rushed beneath the keel, lifting the galley and sliding away beneath it, until the bow foamed bright and the crest surged onward. Mast and yards creaked and groaned under the pressure of the taut sail. High above, in the swaying lookout basket, sat one of our youngest lads, scarcely fourteen years old, his legs dangling over the rim. His lips were pursed as if he were whistling a tune, but it could not be heard, for the wind carried the sound northward.

At regular intervals I cast the log-line, though I had little confidence that the measured speed of the galley was correct. I strongly suspected that we were drifting northward before the wind on a running current, and it made me alternately hot and cold to think that this might be happening at the same velocity as the southward drift through the ice a fortnight before.

Without the others noticing, I gradually laid the course ever closer toward the land, until it pointed sharply upon the northern west coast of the Mark Simbabuie—the vast province of the realm where my brother had once been governor. I preferred to dash against the cliffs of the Sky-Bearer Mountains than to miss the entrance to the strait.

Late in the afternoon of that sunny day, my son, the little Acora Godda, came to keep me company. Until now, the infants had held more fascination for him than the one-eyed helmsman at the tiller, but now he was content again and thinking of me, saying that he wanted to become a little "galley-king" one day.

He told me with deep seriousness that children came into being exactly like plants—like apples, for instance—only that human children were at first much more delicate and sensitive than apples, and had to wait a long time in their mothers' wombs before they could be taken out and allowed to walk about like him and me. I let myself be instructed by my son; and indeed, what he said was perfectly right, according to his child's understanding. I was the most patient listener he knew aboard the ship. But then, I was his father, and Atlanta Framer, the queen, had borne him to me while I was far away from her in Aztlan. How could I not listen patiently to the boy?

"Poor helmsman, I love you very much," said the little fellow suddenly, and he threw his arms around my neck and stroked my brow above the empty, ugly socket of my lost eye. Godda Acora did not know that I was his father. He knew only that, as the son of King Balder, he was someday to wear the crown of the realm—and he thought me a poor man, whom he nevertheless loved especially dearly.

"Where are you sailing now, poor helmsman?" asked the boy.

I told him about the Strait of the Sky-Bearer, and of the high, steep cliff that stood like a guardian upon its edge, and that beyond it lay the Sea of the Mid-Land with its many islands and peninsulas: with the Iberian Mark, where his grandfather had had the silver mined with which the battlements of the royal citadel in Atlantis had been overlaid; with the land of the Etrurans and the triangular island where a fire-mountain smoked; with the peninsula of Hellas and its thousand cities and villages. Yet Hellas, I explained, had once been in conflict with his grandfather, and we did not know how that quarrel now stood. Likely, it had ended—for the great catastrophe of Atlantis must also have struck

the Hellenes. And the royal lord wished to go there to ask whether the strife had truly been settled.

"Is it cold there too?" asked the Acora again. The memory of the frozen northern sea seemed to weigh upon him.

"No, my little Godda," I answered, "in the Sea of the Mid-Land the sun shines. There you will fare very well, and there you shall learn from your old helmsman whatever you wish to learn—much about the stars and the new moon that the Earth caught like a fat fish; about the sun and the wandering bodies that circle around it; about the comets and the white shooting stars that flit like tiny lights across the heavens; about the Earth and its peoples; about the ores from which kings forge their swords; about the black fire-stones with which they make the metal glow and melt; and about the beasts that roam through the green forests."

Thus the Acora and I talked together as the King's galley, with the sheets running free, headed toward the Mountains of the Sky-Bearer, which still lay far, far beyond the horizon in the east.

With keen anticipation I awaited the night. I refused to be relieved from my post, saying that I must take measurements. The King himself took the tiller when evening came, while I waited with pounding heart for the first bright stars. Then I sat long, measuring and calculating, comparing the log readings, and calculating again. The stars were faithful companions—they did not err—and neither did I, for I trusted their guidance. But my heart grew heavy when I turned to the King and reported the result.

"Since yesterday," I said, "we have run four full days' journey farther north."

Wordlessly, the Prince seized the wooden mallet that lay beside him by the thwart and struck it with a resounding crash against one of the bronze shields on the after-rail. I knew what that meant. The King wished to heave to and sail hard against the wind, to regain the land by beating back. A quarter of the drift could indeed be recovered only by sailing against it—by the galley's own speed. But the Strait of the Sky-Bearer, I realized, we had probably already missed.

The watch came tumbling sleepily up from the cabin and rushed to the halyards and sheets. I lay down beside my lord on deck and rejoiced to hear how, at his command, the old galley obediently swung downwind, listened to the rasp of the great sheet-lines running through the blocks of the boom, and the sullen creak of the gaff-spar. The ship heeled deep to port so that the first breakers came over the rail, and then slowly righted herself a little. With a rushing sound the keel plowed southeastward—as close to the wind as possible—and with long

pitching motions our brave old vessel struggled forward against the north-running flood.

The sail-watch went back down into the hold. From time to time a drowsy head with tangled hair appeared from the hatchway, then sank again in reassurance, for the galley held steady on her true course, beating with measured rhythm along her wet path.

The days that followed brought bad, stormy weather. The clouds hung almost down to the surface of the sea; rain and snow fell in great quantities upon the ship, and the distant view toward the hoped-for land was nearly blocked. Unfortunately, I could no longer take positional measurements, but I already sensed that the King's decision to struggle against the moon-born northward current had come too late. The northward-drifting lunar tide had probably long since swept us past the Strait of the Sky-Bearer, and now, hour by hour, was carrying us closer to the boundary of the ice.

Nevertheless, we stubbornly held to our chosen course. By doing so we might yet save a few days' travel and find ourselves, if the ice-current should seize us in its southern drift, already nearer to land.

We needed to wait only a few more days—and then we were fast again, just as we had been thirty days before. Once more the thick ice-slush of the northern ice edge ground about us; once more the birds passed above our heads; once more the frost pierced us through our thin, inadequate clothing.

When I eased the mainsail and had it unrolled upon deck, a dull fury took hold of me. Fresh water was being rationed to the barest minimum; for cooking, only melted snow was allowed—snow that piled high upon our ship and upon the slush of the sea. At the same time we saw, for the first time in these regions, great icebergs, which brought us fog and biting cold. The deck was frozen over; the sheets no longer ran through the blocks, which had iced fast; the sail rings of the yard had frozen into one solid lump; and the rudder itself was bound in ice-slush, so that we strained in vain against the tiller and could make no turn. It was a situation in which one might have howled with despair.

Still, something happened that gave me great consolation. One noon I sighted land in the distance—a mountain range rising high above the sea's surface—and I assumed that this range must be the northern border-barrier of the Iberian Mark against the Drudenland. By that fixed landmark I was at last able to determine with certainty the current's speed, and I found that the northward drift was still very strong.

But by evening even that landmark faded and withdrew far to the southeast, so that I began to suspect we were now being carried into the storm-bay of the Drudenmark, without needing to trouble either sail or oar. In that bay,

however, the ice had jammed in many places. Heavy floes pressed and heaved over one another with cracking thunder, so that we could clearly hear the breaking and splintering, especially at night.

One morning, after a short and restless sleep, I climbed on deck and saw that we were now completely frozen in. The sluggish heaving of the ice-slush masses had ceased; the sea lay before me a monotonous white plain. Only now and then a thunder-like sound rolled across the expanse—when somewhere a new fissure opened. Our young men, reckless and high-spirited as youth must be, were already running about upon the rough ice, though here and there it cracked ominously underfoot. In the distance I saw land again—this time unmoving, fixed in the same direction.

The northward drift of the galley had come to its end.

"Ship to starboard ahead!" cried the boy from the basket above.

I was annoyed and thought the report mistaken, for it sounded too incredible. But I climbed at once into the ice-stiffened shrouds myself and had him point out his discovery from above. As the weather cleared with the growing daylight, I could, with my single eye, make out in the distance an object wedged between low ice-hills—an object that indeed resembled a large galley.

The young man, whose two good eyes saw better than the poor helmsman's one, declared that the ship had two masts, one of which was broken halfway up, while from the end of the other there fluttered a flag of blue ground-color.

That could only be the flag of the Realm!

In a short while, the shrouds and stays of our vessel were crowded with people, all eager to see the other ship. Over there, the crew had evidently spotted us as well, for signal flags rose up their undamaged mast—though we could not decipher them, the air being too hazy. Only the flag of distress I could clearly recognize.

As the frost continued to increase and the ice surrounding our galley became strong enough to bear weight, I asked the King's permission to cross over to the foreign ship—early the next morning, when the ice would be even firmer. I received permission to take five men with me, who were to serve as carriers, for I suspected that the other galley might contain many valuable goods of which we were in need.

It was also not impossible that, after inspection, I might propose abandoning our old vessel and moving over to the larger ship—especially if it had food and water in greater abundance than we. The King, however, did not

like the idea of abandoning his old galley. He was inclined only to place a detachment aboard the other ship, if its advantages proved as great as I supposed. Still, he agreed that the attempt must be made to reach it.

That the ship was in distress could be seen from its flag. True, we ourselves were also in distress, but we were fast in the ice-slush, which had now frozen hard and lifted the galley's hull above the waterline. The other ship, however, hung many feet higher than we, wedged between tree-thick, splintered floes. That could mean grave danger for both vessel and crew—and perhaps the ice had already stove in her planking, so that she might sink the moment she was freed.

The rounded hull-form of the Atlantean galleys, however, seemed to be most favorable against the pressure of ice, as I could see from the King's own ship, which had risen easily out of the frozen mass and was no longer under strain. If this were also true of the foreign galley, there was hope that she might still be seaworthy.

The next morning, well equipped with blankets and weapons, we set out across the ice. Our small boat—which was usually lashed upside-down on deck—my men now dragged behind them on a rope, like a sledge. I had thought it wise to bring the boat, since no one could know whether or when cracks might open in the ice, which we might be forced to cross afloat.

In that small sledge-boat sat, warmly wrapped, my old mother, who with her own indomitable will had insisted on coming along—"for over there," she said, "they are in distress, and likely also in sickness." She was skilled in the healing arts and hoped to be of help. So she rode with us in the boat-sledge; but I knew the true reason that moved her: she distrusted the strength of the ice and wished to go down together with her son, if it must be so.

She had made no objection that I should lead the expedition to the foreign ship—for indeed, only I could do so. The King belonged to his galley and to his small people. Lord Framer of Akapana was too old for such a march across rough ice, and it would have been unseemly for a noble leader to be pulled in the small boat. Thus only I remained as leader—if only because I alone could judge whether the sailing qualities of the other ship, lifted so high by the ice, had been damaged or not.

As companions I chose Lord Gerdung of Gaardepoort, my friend and brother-in-arms from the days of my short governorship on the island of Acora; then the shipwright Saland, a capable carpenter and craftsman; the laborers Forsanti and Luhre; and my young ship's boy Lutbrand, to whom I was particularly attached. The lad was brave, loyal, and dependable, and I hoped he would one day become a worthy knight.

To my astonishment, halfway across we encountered a slender figure coming toward us—and as it came nearer, I saw that it was a very young girl, scarcely eighteen years old. The stranger had protected herself against the cold with a costly fur mantle, which I could not help admiring. We possessed no furs at all, since we came from the equatorial regions, where such garments were unknown. The frost was biting—the kind that froze one's breath stiff in the beard.

I myself wore my now very thin and worn black scholar's cloak, with my sword-belt buckled over it. On my head was a cap of brown sheep's wool, which my mother had made for me from the remnants of a moth-eaten blanket, for the cold nights at the galley's tiller.

I had to smile when I saw that the young stranger's small hand gripped the hilt of a dagger-like knife at her right hip. In that stance she looked exactly like a little knight, determined to defend herself against a one-eyed robber and his rough companions. Her clear blue eyes were fixed on me with hatred—and also with some fear—and I could well understand her tension: she was, after all, a young and poorly armed girl, standing before five bearded, dangerous-looking men armed to the teeth. And I knew, too, that a one-eyed man does not make a particularly trustworthy impression.

The girl wore no head-covering, despite the severe frost; she had no need of one, for her thick braids were wound tightly about her round head like a cap. When I saw that her steps began to falter, that she hesitated and finally stopped—glancing uncertainly back toward the two-masted ship on its hill of ice—I laid my sword in the boat beside my mother, took off my cloak as well, so that the stranger might see I was unarmed, and ordered my men to halt.

Then I walked alone toward the formidable little opponent—who, I hope, was at least somewhat relieved to see that the one-eyed giant Godda Apacheta did not mean to strike her down at once.

In truth — the girl was right. What I did not yet know, she already knew better. The time of axe and sword had come upon the ravaged Earth. It was no longer wise to trust the stranger, and it was wise to be cautious even toward one's own brother. Hunger and need turn even noble men into wild beasts — especially when it is a question of preserving one's own kin against another, which likewise fights for its life and for power, within ever smaller and smaller circles.

I still carried remnants of a good upbringing and still held no small opinion of my own knightly honor. Yet I did not know then how soon even I would become a ruthless fighter against all and everyone who stood in the way of my will to live — and to rule.

The girl let her hand fall from the dagger's hilt and raised it hesitantly in greeting, as I did. Then we stood silently facing each other, and she looked with visible horror and dread upon my empty left eye-socket — which, I knew well, was an ugly sight — but in my haste I had forgotten to tie over it the black patch my mother had made for me.

And now I was permitted a touch of vanity. The blue, cool eyes of the stranger passed appraisingly to my sound eye, seemed to judge it swiftly, and then wandered toward my companions waiting in the background. The strained tension in her pale face relaxed at once. She was suddenly unafraid — and that made me proud, for I had not yet spoken a single reassuring word.

"I am Godda Apacheta, from Aztlan," I said at last.

"My name is Katte Hogger, from Vingat in Grönland," she answered in a hoarse voice, for she had evidently caught a chill in the icy air.

"Katte Hogger," I repeated. "So you are a maiden of my own homeland, Thule — from the green land at the Pole. The Hoggers were merchants of the Atlantean realm, were they not? I often saw their cargo galleys loading and unloading in the harbor of Atlantis. It was said that the Hogger daughters were the richest heiresses in the North."

"They are now worth only as much as they can offer themselves," laughed the girl, showing her strong, beautiful teeth.

I asked what help she required, for I had seen beside the banner of the Realm the flag of distress flying from the after-mast of her galley. We might save time, I said, if I learned her need at once and could send some of my men back to the King's galley for tools or provisions.

No, she said, they needed only medical aid for her father, who had remained aboard the packet-ship. Food and water were abundant — only the people were lacking. The entire crew had gone ashore eight days ago. Her father had not been on good terms with them; there had been strife and fighting, in which he had been struck down. She herself had been forced to go with the sailors and the few passengers, but had fled on the second night and returned to the ship, because her father had been left helpless behind. The wounded man, she said, they had refused to take with them. Now she was alone with the injured one on the great galley and begged for a healer's help.

"Katte Hogger, did you not know that you went to certain death when you returned alone to the galley?" I asked.

"I did not think of that, Godda Apacheta," she replied.

And I thought: this girl is of noble blood.

When I turned to call my men, Katte took my hand and walked beside me toward the boat. She seemed to feel safer while holding my hand. At first glance she was still a child, for our northern maidens retain their early youth for a long time.

My men and my mother greeted her kindly, and she released my hand and greeted each of them in turn. My mother, however, looked at me searchingly — and smiled a little. Then we went on, and came to the foreign ship, which we boarded by a rope-ladder that hung from the rail down to the ice.

In the chartroom of the ship's master lay the merchant Hogger of Vingat, his arm and head bandaged. He lay unconscious and did not notice when we entered quietly. My mother went to him at once. But I knew the mask of death — I had seen it too often in the last six years to be mistaken. The young Katte would soon lose her father.

I now had to see to the living and the healthy, and asked the girl to let me inspect the ship. Was there water and food on board? Yes, she had already said as much out on the ice: there was more than enough, in fact, for the crew that had gone ashore had been able to take away only a small portion. The Windbirge was her father's packet ship, and it was richly laden with provisions that had been destined for Paardegatt — an island of the Realm that had sunk together with Atlantis beneath the floods of the Atlantic Sea.

Of course, Katte Hogger did not know whether the vessel's planking and keel were still sound. The ice floes, she said, had often pressed it violently; she had heard the timbers groan and creak day and night, but then the ship had always been lifted up again by the ice-pressure, and the cracking would cease. Each time the rounded hull had slid upward anew, and this had gone on for a year and a half without any serious damage ever befalling the ship.

Katte guided me through her father's galley and told me how he and she had come aboard, for she knew well that it was not customary for a shipowner — and even less his daughter — to take part in a captain's sea voyage, except on rare occasions when business in distant parts of the world made such a journey necessary. Her father had once maintained a fleet of sixty-eight packet ships on all the seas of the Realm, and one of them, the Windbirge, had been lying at anchor in Vingat when the terrible earthquake came. It was six years ago, she said, and it had struck so suddenly that her father's timber hall in Vingat had rocked like a ship in a storm.

I nodded — for I myself had lived through the same in Aztlan, in perhaps even more dreadful form.

"Go on," I urged, as we passed through the cargo decks of the ship, along narrow corridors in which the frost reigned mercilessly.

Yet that frost had had its good side — it had preserved everything. The stores of food that lay here had been frozen for six years, or at least for a very long time, and could not spoil. I shivered in my thin silk cloak.

"Poor Sir Godda," said Katte Hogger, noticing it. "You are no longer young. I will fetch you a fur cloak, so that you do not fall ill while with me."

I let her do so, and rejoiced in the pleasant warmth that the thick fur gave. Katte Hogger went on speaking while I continued to inspect the rooms of the galley one by one.

At that time, she said, when the earthquakes began, her father had gone to the harbor to have the ship cleared for departure by the customs office. She knew he would afterward go aboard to take leave of some friends who were to sail as passengers on the Windbirge to Paardegatt and Atlantis. When the shocks grew stronger, thundering and rumbling, she had run out of the house — not, she added quickly, because she was timid, but because it had been terrifying beyond measure. She had never known that the earth could shake and sway, which had always been so firm and secure beneath her feet.

Still, the house had not collapsed, for it was not built of stone like the houses in Atlantis, but of oak timber. The beams and frames had bent, indeed, but nothing worse had happened, and she and her household had remained unhurt.

In the harbor town of Vingat, however, fires had broken out in many places; one could see them only dimly through the suddenly hazy air. Knowing that her father was at the harbor, she had decided to run to him, even though the ground kept jolting beneath her feet, so that she had fallen several times. The earth had also sunk in at many spots, and she had often been forced to go around such places.

At the harbor she had seen with her own eyes how the water fell — not very quickly, but visibly, so that one could follow the sinking of the level hour by hour, until the harbor floor, with all its refuse, lay exposed, and the many vessels moored at the piers had settled upon the bottom.

"At the Equator the water must have risen at the same hour," I said thoughtfully, and halted.

Yes — that must have been it! The gravitational pull of the newly appeared Moon had drawn the waters of Earth's oceans equally toward itself. Thus the waters around Grönland, high at the Pole, had necessarily fallen in corresponding measure.

I asked Katte Hogger to go on with her story. Yes, she said, it had been utterly uncanny. All along the mountains of Grönland — we people of Thule call it Grönland, she smiled — there had suddenly appeared a long, perfectly straight line which rose higher and higher above the sea. It had looked as though the entire landmass were rising evenly from the ocean, but in truth it had been the water that was falling. She could not say for certain; yet that straight line along the mountain slopes had been the mark of the former shoreline.

At that time, when all this occurred, she had been twelve years old — but she remembered it as if it had happened only yesterday. Later, as the water repeatedly returned and withdrew again, she had realized that it was not the land that was rising, but the sea itself retreating and returning, giving the illusion of a rising coast; for every four weeks, when the flood came back, it seemed as though the land sank again a little into the sea. But such a rising and falling of the land in short intervals, she said, could not possibly be real.

I agreed with the young girl — she had observed correctly. It was not the land that moved, but the waters of the sea. The opposite phenomenon had occurred at the Equator; and even now the ocean surged back and forth in a cycle of four weeks, following the tide-pull of the Moon, which in that same time drew near to the Earth and then receded from it again. This last explanation the young Katte did not quite understand, but she said nothing. Then she continued her tale.

She had found her father safe on board the Windbirge. The ship, however, had been lying aground, unable to stir, for the water had vanished. The passengers had gone ashore, then the crew as well, until finally there had been nothing to do but go home, for an icy wind had arisen, and snow had begun to fall in quantities such as had never before been seen in fair, green Vingat.

Then, she said, they had remained in the town for four more years, while many other people had long since crossed the frozen sea, seeking warmer lands in the South. But many had perished, for the cold in the open was murderous, and only in heated rooms could one survive the years-long, unbroken winter. Enormous quantities of coal had been required, and even the greatest thrift could not prevent the wooden walls of their house in Vingat from glittering constantly with frost, while the cold crept in through the smallest cracks. The whole city had slowly fallen desolate. Those who remained had at last begun to tear down the empty houses for firewood. Her father had done the same — first dismantling his own home and warehouses, and later even breaking up strangers' houses to feed the fire.

"And the sea?" I asked, for the thought of the lunar tide before the Strait of the Sky-Bearer would not leave me.

I had barely an eye for the state of the keel we were now inspecting as we moved through the bilge-room.

"What do you mean, Godda Apacheta?" asked the girl. "I told you already — the sea went away."

I replied that I had heard that — but she had also said the sea had returned, and I wanted to know how high it had risen each time.

Katte then told how the sea had risen again every four weeks, but never as high as before the great earthquakes began — no, not nearly so high! It had remained at least two hundred feet below the dry strand-line along the mountain slopes.

"And your ship, the Windbirge?" I asked.

The vessel, she said, had been hopelessly locked in ice — whether it lay aground or was lifted every four weeks by the returning water, it had remained nearly the same through all those years. Had her father not, from time to time with a few servants, shoveled the snow from the deck, the galley might long since have disappeared altogether.

In the depth of the frost there had been a noticeable difference: when the water receded, the air had become unbearably thin, as on the highest mountains, and at the same time the cold had grown sharper. But when the water returned, the cold eased a little, and the air grew denser again.

When I heard this, I at once suspected that the Moon was drawing not only the waters but also the air from the poles toward the equator, and releasing it again toward the poles when it moved away from the Earth. I was glad that an eyewitness could confirm what I had long supposed.

Katte Hogger continued:

The ship, she said, had for years alternately lain upon frozen mud and floated upon shallow water, encircled by a wreath of torn ice-floes around its rounded hull. It had looked like an iceberg that always seemed ready to drift away whenever the water receded, and which was only held fast by the frozen cables of its anchors.

She and her father, wrapped in double and triple furs, had often gone to visit the Windbirge; they had dug a tunnel through the snow down to the companionway and, just as now with you, Lord Godda of Aztlan, had gone through the rooms of the vessel to see whether it remained sound and seaworthy.

The cargo, which I had seen in the holds and which consisted for the most part of foodstuffs, was a full six years old, yet had not spoiled in the unbroken, merciless frost. When the sea returned, the water had never been sufficient to raise the galleys lying aground in the harbor, but the Windbirge, which had lain on the outer roadstead ready for departure, had each time been lifted from the bottom and had looked like a drifting iceberg such as now floated everywhere upon the ocean.

For the frost had become so terrible that the fertile green land had fallen beneath a panzer of ice, and from this armor, from the mountains, a series of glaciers had flowed into the sea, breaking away and drifting as icebergs out into the Atlantic.

I asked how things had stood in Vingat with food, as we examined the steering gear to test its fitness. Katte Hogger replied that it had always gone well enough — there had been inexhaustible supplies. Her father alone had possessed several tall wooden storehouses, and all of them had been filled.

“When, in the years that followed,” the girl went on, “more and more people tried to escape the murderous cold by marching southward over the frozen sea, we too were able to live on the stores left behind by others — for they no longer had need of them.

But we had seen that this flight seldom brought salvation. Many returned with frost-bitten limbs and told of fields of corpses they had encountered along the way — corpses later washed away when the sea came back.

I was sixteen when I advised my father to sail with the ice-bound galley to Scotenland. It was not so far, and the cold there would surely not be so terrible as in Vingat, for Scotenland lay much farther south than Grönland.”

Her father, however, could not quite see the sense of it. He said that they could endure a few more years, and there would still be time afterward to attempt such a venture. Yet from that hour he began visiting his galley more often.

The cold grew harder and more unbearable from year to year. It became nearly impossible to step outside without returning with frost-damaged fingers or an inflamed nose. The situation at last became so desperate that we went aboard the galley and hacked free the frozen ropes. My father persuaded one of his old ship-masters to attempt the voyage to Scotenland.

Alas, there were few seasoned seamen left in the dead city, so the crew was poor. We had to hire rough rabble, dragged from wooden huts. And besides, the last families remaining in Vingat wished to sail with us.”

Katte and I went back up on deck. I was satisfied with my inspection of the ship. If ever it should again be freed from the ice, it would in fact be more seaworthy than our old Atlantean galley, which truly had already known its full measure of honorable voyages across the wide sea. I intended soon to return to the King and propose that the Windbirge also be taken toward the Sea of Middland. I would leave it to the Prince to decide whether he wished to command the ship himself or entrust it to me. The decision had to be made quickly, for at this time the current must soon turn southward, and I could not foresee what new surprises it might bring to our two vessels.

"Are you still listening to me, Godda Apacheta?" asked Katte Hogger's reproachful voice.

I nodded and begged her pardon for my distraction. We sat together on a bench in the men's quarters. She understood that my thoughts must also dwell on my King across the ice — and on the rescue of the Windbirge.

"Now tell me the rest, Katte," I said.

"There isn't much more to tell," she replied. They had not truly sailed. The men had used frozen poles to push the ship into deeper water and had tried to make ready the sails, but it had gone badly, though they had chipped off the ice days beforehand. Then, in an uncanny way, the ocean itself had helped them — it had suddenly lifted the galley upon its shoulder and carried it drifting southward.

When they awoke one morning and looked for land, there was only ice and slush all around — Grönland, the bright, sunlit homeland, had vanished. For nearly a year and a half they had drifted thus, never free of the ice. It had been terrible, for the passengers had fallen into despair, and the crew had mutinied against their commander. In such a revolt the commander had been slain. Another had been chosen in his place, and when he too was struck down in a dreadful quarrel over the women, yet another was chosen.

"Were there many women and girls aboard the Windbirge?" I asked, thinking that the discipline aboard the King's galley was of a better kind.

"No," she said, "only three women and two girls — but sixteen men. Some of them were of mixed stock, not true Northerners. I will speak openly — the quarrels were almost always about me, though I was not to blame. In the end I yielded to a young man, hoping thereby to bring peace, and I thought things would go well between us. But soon he turned to another woman, and the steersman, who was later chosen as leader, sought me for himself.

He was a strong, hot-tempered man, and when I refused him he took a terrible revenge. I will not say how. Through strife and murder the crew

dwindled, until at last they abandoned the ship, having sighted land upon the horizon — the same land that even now you can still see."

"And you, Katte?" I asked softly, for this fine young woman moved me deeply with pity.

"I was forced to go with them," she answered. "I begged to remain behind to care for my wounded father, and also because I had a child — a boy of thirty days — whom I had to nurse. But it was of no use. They dragged me along, for the steersman wanted to keep me. During a snowstorm, still out upon the ice of the storm-bay, I managed to escape and return to the ship. My child, a beautiful boy, froze to death on the journey. I myself survived, though my throat and lungs ache from the cutting, icy wind. You can hear it, Godda Apacheta, how hoarse and weary my voice has become. But now I am doubly glad that I came back."

I thought how quickly need can make beasts of men. And this noble, good girl spoke of her suffering as though she had never known any other kind of life.

"Why did you have your hand on your dagger when we met, Katte Hogger?" I asked after a time.

"Do you not know, Lord Godda?" she replied.

"Yes, I know," I replied. "There comes a boundary beyond which one must put an end to shame and humiliation. And you had reached that boundary — the point you refused to cross."

Katte placed her hand gratefully upon mine for a moment and nodded.

"Now everything is well, Lord Godda. I have found you, and you are like a steadfast rock. Even your face, with the missing left eye, is beautiful. But I will make you a new eye — one that matches the other in color, or at least resembles it."

I looked at her fair, pale face in astonishment and asked how she meant to do that. She answered that, long ago, even as a very young girl, she had worked with precious stones, more as a pastime than in earnest. She had been the rich heiress of the House of Hogger, as I myself had said earlier when we faced one another upon the frozen sea. Her father had greatly indulged her and had always sent her the most beautiful gemstones from Atlantis. He had even given her grinding-plates and polishing wheels, so that during the endless winter days in frozen Vingat she could sit by the warm hearth and gradually acquire a certain skill in cutting and polishing gems.

"You must be patient," she said. "I will find my stones again — I brought them with me aboard the Windbirge. On a base of bluish-white agate I will set a blue stone, and in its center I will grind a small opening to hold a black diamond for the pupil. You have met me with reverence and kindness, and you have honored me as a woman — after the bitter years I have endured, that is a great and unexpected happiness."

Inwardly, I smiled. So now the one-eyed, ugly steersman was to be made handsome again! But I gladly accepted the gift of this brave young woman.

We went together to the chart-room and entered quietly on tiptoe. My mother had meanwhile examined the wounded man and told me I must at once set the depressed bone of his skull. She had already sent to the King's galley to fetch my surgical instruments. If we left the man lying thus much longer, he would soon die — that, she said, I could see for myself. Therefore it was necessary to lift or remove the splinter that pressed upon his brain. She did not consider the merchant of Vingat's condition entirely hopeless.

Around midday the messenger brought the surgical kit — and the King himself came for a short visit.

I reported to him the results of my examination and laid before him my proposals regarding the manning of the merchant vessel. The King decided that he would personally take command of the Windbirge with the necessary seamen, and that all the women, with the exception of my mother, should be transferred to the larger ship, where they would be better housed and where the small children would also receive better care. I was to take command of the royal galley and, like the King, attempt to enter the Strait of the Sky-Bearer. The appointed rendezvous would be the eastern cape of the Triangular Isle, with its fire-mountain at the southern end of the Tyrrhenian Sea. There each of us was to wait a full year for the other to arrive. If one reached it first, he was to leave a message there.

Katte Hogger had listened. When the King left the ship, she said to me that she wished to transfer with me to the King's galley. She wished to remain under my mother's care — and she would in turn care for my mother in her old age. "Your mother makes an exception," she said softly, "and may stay with you — why not I as well?"

I replied that here only the King had authority, not I; and that his decision was wise and deliberate. The women would fare far better aboard her father's great ship than upon our small, weathered galley of Atlantis. She must obey, as all of the King's people must; and the King was her lord too, though the realm had perished and held no power anymore.

The young woman fell silent.

My mother had meanwhile prepared everything for the operation — dusted the wounded man with coca powder, though he was almost constantly unconscious; but I considered it necessary, for he might awaken under the pain of the procedure. The blades and shears had been stropped on leather and sharpened. I had to work by artificial light, and at first I was uncertain, for I had not practiced this craft for many years. In later years, however, I was to have far more occasion for it than I would have wished.

When I removed the splinter of bone, bleeding of the brain began, and the wounded man died beneath my hands. It was a crushing result, though I had half foreseen it. Katte Hogger was present when it happened, yet she did not weep; she merely took my hand.

"Keep me with you, Godda Apacheta," she pleaded. "Let me go with your mother to the King's galley."

I shook my head and repeated that it must remain as the King had ordered. My mother said nothing, for she too was long accustomed to obedience. In our desperate situation, survival was possible only if one man commanded and all others obeyed. I would gladly have taken Katte Hogger with me, but selfish wishes had no place in my thoughts. The King's decision was right — and, quite apart from that, unalterable.

Toward evening I took leave of Katte and said to her, half in jest,

"The beautiful new eye you have promised me — I shall have it only in Tyrrhenia or in Hellas. But I already look forward to it — to being once more a handsome and gallant knight, thanks to you."

That night I left my mother aboard the Windbirge, both to comfort Katte Hogger and to serve as a watch; with her remained the five men under the command of my friend Gerdung von Gaardepoort. Then I set out alone across the ice, to return to the King and assume command of the galley.

I intended to propose to him that the transfer to the Windbirge be carried out that very night, for I did not trust the tidal current, which at this hour must turn and begin to flow southward. The King's orders therefore had to be executed with the greatest possible speed. The Windbirge's signal lights could serve as beacons in the dark, and I was ready myself to lead the women to the ship.

But after I had gone several hundred paces away from the merchantman, a crackling and distant thunder rolled across the rough ice-field and came swiftly nearer. Unfortunately, it was already nearly dark, and mist lay thick upon the sea,

so I could no longer make out what was happening. The crashing and rumbling passed by close at hand with a deafening sound and then died away.

At once I guessed that the ice had split somewhere and now formed a cleft, over which I could cross only by boat. Since the bursting noise had passed not far from where I stood, I ran as fast as I could toward the place where I believed the ice had broken open.

Soon I reached an open rift, in which the water of the ocean gurgled and boiled. The fissure had already widened with great speed, and I saw that the southward-drifting tide had begun — it had seized the entire ice-field opposite me and carried it away. Through the dim haze I could just make out the King's galley and a few gray figures standing upon the ice nearby. Then darkness fell swiftly.

Not knowing whether the ice might also begin to break behind me, I ran, half-mad with fear, back to the Windbirge. There was no sense in fetching the small boat and dragging it to the fissure, for the enormous floe bearing the King's ship was already drifting away at high speed. To attempt pursuit was hopeless. I had to be thankful simply that I had reached the Hogger vessel unscathed.

At first I expected that our own portion of the jammed ice would soon also begin to drift. It did — but very slowly, as I observed the next morning. The tide pressed us eastward in jerking surges, driving us at the same time toward the coast. The southward-running lunar current struck here against the mountain barrier of the Iberian Mark, which faced north, and from this collision arose a deflecting eastward stream into which we had been caught.

Since the wind stood fair, we could hear from the shore the piercing crack and grind of ice floes, which were evidently being heaped up one upon another there. Because of this congestion, our drift eastward proceeded hesitantly and with many interruptions. Everywhere the ice-field split apart; even beneath the merchantman the ice broke with loud reports and piled itself in slabs a foot thick, until the Windbirge was lifted ever higher, and finally rested like a queen upon a little iceberg, amid heaps of glass-hard plates. From then on, day by day, we were pushed closer toward the coast, where the ice had piled itself into mountainous walls.

Those were bitter days and nights which I spent aboard Hogger's ship. Of the King's galley there was no further sign. To the southwest lay the open sea, soon filling with slush-ice, as I could tell by the color and by the sluggish, viscous heaving that passed over its wide surface.

I stood by the rail, gazing out across the vast, ice-gray Atlantic Ocean, measuring with my eyes the distance to the mountainous headland where the

King's galley had last drifted into free water. We, by contrast, were held fast by the coastal barrier. Yet I had not wholly lost hope of freeing my ship and following after the Prince. That he might succeed in reaching the Strait of the Sky-Bearer I could no longer wish, now that he was so near the land. Nevertheless, he had appointed the Triangular Isle as our meeting place! Surely, I thought, this would be the last drift voyage of the King's galley, for his provisions must now be nearly exhausted. Perhaps — yes, perhaps — I would see the King and his little people again. Each jerking thrust of the ice-fields, which pushed and lifted my new ship, rekindled my hope that the floe would swing seaward and reach open water.

Yet I deceived myself with no illusions. I had five seamen aboard my galley, and the young Katte Hogger, who in need could serve as lookout. It would not be easy to handle so large a merchant ship with so few hands. Since the aftermast was broken, I resolved to remove it entirely and rig the foremast with a single simple sail. The salvaged timber from the aftermast would serve as welcome coal for the galley's kitchen.

And if it failed?

Then I was resolved to attempt the march over land, even if it should take ten years or more! I had orders from King Balder to wait upon the Triangular Isle at the southern end of the Tyrrhenian Sea, or — if he were no longer there — to collect whatever message he had left. This, then, was my goal, and I would not depart from it.

I doubted that the freezing of the northern land of Thule had rendered the Drudenmark and Teutenland wholly impassable. But if it had, then I was prepared to perish honorably — as the little fliers from the Northland had perished, those who had fallen exhausted upon the ice of the Atlantic Sea.

Singing swans passed overhead. They flew undaunted and brave once more toward the south, for the tide of the dreadful moon was driving the ice southward. When was it to end?

I know the stars — they have time. And the new moon of the Earth has time as well. A thousand years mean little to it. Perhaps it would take many thousands of years to round out its orbit around the old Earth, until its distance from her again became nearly constant. Then, too, the glaciation of the Thule lands would recede. I sensed this more than I knew it — yet I knew that I would not live to see it.

My five men came up on deck to me. They wanted to know what should now be done, since the King's galley had vanished. Forsanti and Luhre stood side by side, grave-faced; they had likely lost their young wives and small children forever, and their eyes were dark with sorrow.

Gerdung von Gaardepoort was calm and steady as always, and looked at me with a brave smile. Saland, the wheelwright and carpenter, stood expressionless; he had a wife and five children on the King's galley. The lad Lutbrand came last up from below. He was not particularly despondent, taking the adventure as youth takes it. He had no wife yet, but, as I knew, he had fallen in love with a young girl on the King's galley — one who had still been uncertain whether to accept the suit of so young a man. Now the question was answered. Lutbrand could not seek her reply again — not for a long time, if ever. Perhaps one day he would like Katte Hogger? Who could tell? I had not much to distribute — for in my little company there was but one young woman, namely Katte.

I told the men briefly what I intended to do. They begged me not only to be their captain at sea, should we ever sail again, but also their duke upon land. They pledged me unconditional obedience, as though I were the King himself, and promised to stand together as good comrades must when they are in distress. I required their word that they would never raise weapons against one another, however grave the reason might be, without first asking for my judgment. They also vowed to honor and protect my mother and Katte Hogger as honorable Thule-folk should.

Then they set to work at once — removing the broken mast, carefully freeing the frozen rigging and sails, and carrying them below deck to thaw.

A permanent watch was established, with five-hour shifts, to ensure the safety of the ship. Such long watches could be endured despite the biting frost, for the Windbirge had ample, fine fur coats aboard.

We buried Merchant Hogger in an ice-grave near the ship and covered it with heavy slabs of ice, so that no beast wandering from the land over the ice might find and dig up the body.

Katte Hogger gave me her father's costly furs, linen, and garments, and made sure that we men kept ourselves neat and disciplined. Even my old mother soon wore a dress of precious Zipangu silk, almost black in hue with a bluish tone, and I remarked once, as we all sat together, that it was indeed an advantage to be aboard the ship of the richest heiress of Greenland, the North-land of Thule.

Katte Hogger was pleased to be able to help.

She sewed a new jerkin for Master Saland, gave him a fine fur with hood, and distributed from her father's linen stores whatever she could spare. I too received a splendid fur cap that could be pulled down over the shoulders, and in time the other men received similar headgear for the cold hours of their watch.

The black scholar's cloak, which my queen Atlanta Framer had long worn, I gave to my mother, who packed it away for a time that would be warmer than these days at the ice-frontier of Thule.

But Katte sat day after day at a little table in her cabin, tirelessly grinding gemstones she had taken from her store. My old mother watched her with a smile and told the young woman tales of Aztlan — of the last Atlanteans' struggle for the Mark Tiahusinju, of the march through the royal Andes to the sea, and of the long voyage upon the King's galley over the sunken realm of Atlantis to Thule.

When I once entered to visit my mother, Katte Hogger held something out to me.

"It already looks quite right," she said.

"Hm?" I asked.

"Yes, Lord Godda. This will be your new eye."

Windbirge

The moon-tide returned again and drifted northward. The ice-slush heaved together and piled up day and night with a horrifying crack, swelled over our plain like a long-stretched rampart and finally froze solid. Day after day I stood in the lookout of the foremast and scanned for the King's galley, to see if it might drift past, but I did not see it.

Katte Hogger had climbed up to me, standing on the basket-threshold of the lookout, and helped me search with her young eyes. She thought it might be a long time before the King's galley appeared. After all, the Windbirge had been drifting from north to south and back again, helpless before the icy current, for almost a year and a half. Not a single day had the ship been in free water. Twice during that dreadful drift she had seen galleys frozen in the same way as the Windbirge, making the same monotonous journey—once to the south and, fourteen days later, to the north—endless, without hope of an end.

Yet there was no one aboard now who could have held out any hope; these were cargo galleys with general freight, and their crews had lain down below decks and starved or frozen. When these people had met death no one could say. It might have been three days ago, or thirty, or even several years, for the cold had preserved the corpses so well that their age could not be determined.

I replied that the King's galley had fared more favorably. She did not come, like the Windbirge and the other ships Katte had described, from the north, but from the south, and drifted along the southern edge of the ice-field. That was why she returned to free water again and again. The King, too, was a capable seaman and would force his boat into the Strait of the Sky-Bearer. Moreover he was prepared, should that plan fail, to run the ship ashore, and he was now so close to land that this would be possible.

On one of the following days, when the ice beneath us had come to rest and no longer drifted eastward toward the coast, Forsanti in the lookout reported a party of men climbing over the ice-floes from the shore. It soon became clear that these men were making for the Windbirge. With her keen eyes Katte recognized one of the four men as the steersman of the Windbirge. She grew violently excited; her lips went pale; she ran below and returned with a small firearm—something she must have kept hidden, for I had not seen it before.

"What do you want those arrows for, Katte Hogger?" I asked as she hurried on deck and stood beside me. She answered that she intended to shoot the steersman when he came near—and the others too. She said she had the enormous fortune of having come to noble people and wanted to drive off those murder-wolves; they were worth nothing but being shot. I looked in

astonishment at Katte's face, so full of hatred, the woman who, despite her motherhood, was almost still a child—as so often with such young northern girls.

"You must have a terrible score to settle with those men, Katte," I said, testing her.

"There is nothing more beautiful than revenge, Godda Apacheta," she replied. "I did not tell you everything because I was ashamed before you. Perhaps you would not have done it either, had you known. In any case I shall shoot these beasts."

"Away with them," said my old mother, who had suddenly come up beside us. "Here we must remain masters, and we cannot use an unreliable, foreign folk."

I was much surprised by the hatred of the two women and grew thoughtful about what it might mean. Time was pressing, so I ordered that Katte Hogger was to speak with the men and nothing more; we men would hold ourselves hidden and ready with our weapons. I reserved everything else to myself. The girl seemed to agree.

But Katte did not keep her word.

She waited for the steersman's greeting as we had arranged, then suddenly drew her bow and released an arrow. The steersman collapsed onto the ice; the missile had driven into his mouth. The other men hastily retreated. Katte shot again, but the second arrow failed to reach its mark.

I seized Katte's arm and shook it roughly, for I was angry at the girl. She smiled at me kindly as if I had not gripped her hard, and said, "You soft Godda Apacheta! You too will become hard."

"And you acted foolishly!" I retorted angrily. "Those men will return now and bring overwhelming numbers that I do not fear, but which in battle can cost the blood of our own. I could have seized those four men all at once today."

"I did not want that, Godda Apacheta," she explained with eyes full of hate. "The other one I shot at was my husband, the father of my child. I regret that I did not strike him."

I turned away and went down into the cabin.

When I sat below with my mother, Katte Hogger entered and seated herself beside me.

"What did you intend to do with those men, Godda Apacheta?"

she asked softly and modestly, for she seemed at last to feel some pang of conscience.

I explained that, as far as I could tell, the men had been Atlanteans. It was quite possible that one or another of them might have proved useful, and, under strict discipline, become once again a decent fellow. My five followers were too few for a sea-voyage, and too few also for a journey by land; therefore I would have welcomed reinforcements. The steersman, of course, I would have driven away — and the other, who had been Katte's husband, as well, for he would have been intolerable among us. But the remaining two I would have straightened out — Katte, despite my mildness, might trust me in that.

And if she ever again attempted to resist my orders or intentions, she would very quickly learn that the crooked-iron (the stocks) could be used against girls too, to compel obedience.

Katte Hogger bowed her fine, round head in surprise — and, it seemed to me, in shame as well — and I confess that at the sight I was near to softening. My mother noticed this impulse, of course; she knew me too long, and smiled at me as if to say that Godda still had much to learn before he put a young woman into the stocks.

Yes — lively young Katte, who could wield her weapon swiftly and without hesitation, was not without danger, no, not in any respect.

"I thought you would punish me at once, Lord Godda," said Katte after a while. "I thank you that you have not. From now on I will obey you. Are you kind to me again?"

In truth, I had not been as angry with her as she perhaps believed. I understood the longing of this young wild creature to avenge herself bloodily upon her enemy. Yet it had to be made clear that aboard the Windbirge — and anywhere else — Godda Apacheta was the duke, not the young Katte Hogger.

I made no answer to her last question, whether I was reconciled to her again; but she understood, and my mother smiled.

The girl from Vingat felt wholly at ease under the protection of my old mother. She evidently had with her the feeling of perfect safety, and she knew well how to make use of that security which she had so long been forced to do without.

She had, by the way, lied to me when she told me her child had frozen to death on the flight. One evening, weeping, she had confessed to my mother that she had strangled the boy herself on the journey and hidden the little body beneath the men's baggage on a sled before she turned back toward the Windbirge. She had done it because her husband had delivered her over to the will of the steersman and the crew. Only her father had tried, to the last, to

protect her. Time and again she had defended herself against the steersman, and in one such encounter he had struck down Father Hogger.

Once I asked Katte distrustfully what the other women had been like — who they were, and how many there had been on board.

"There were four women and one young girl, besides me," answered Katte, looking at me with her clear, fearless eyes. "I know well what you wish to know, Godda Apacheta. You distrust me — and you are right to. I was certainly not the best of the Atlantean women and girls on that ship; I know myself too well for that. I was rebellious and proud, and I resisted whenever I felt disgust. The others were more timid and soft; they therefore fared better than I did — at least in how they were treated. Otherwise it went with me as with them: I was forced. The men knew I was proud, and that I had to pay for — pay far worse than if I had submitted quietly. I cannot tell you everything, Godda Apacheta. You are old and have probably known many women of every sort. But compared with me, you are still a great child."

"Then you must be terribly depraved," I remarked, barely suppressing my amusement, for up to that moment I had imagined something quite different under the notion of a fallen woman.

"I am," Katte Hogger answered defiantly. "I don't know whether you have a child, Lord Godda, but I think not—otherwise your mother would have told me. So you can't understand how I feel. I killed my little son, and now it torments me more than I can tell you. I loved the child, even though I hated his father with burning hatred—and the child was innocent, though all the others were guilty. You know, sometimes I wish I had never fallen into your hands. I don't belong with you. I don't belong with noble people at all."

I gently stroked her hand in pity.

"Stop that, Lord Godda," she said hoarsely, "or I'll start crying in front of you."

I then asked her whether she thought it worthwhile to try to reclaim the women from the Windbirge's departed crew. She replied that it would be worth no more and no less than it had been with herself—and that those women, too, would be happy to return to an environment where they would be respected and treated as noble. But she had also thought about the men. There had been some good ones among them, she said, and I had been right to scold her when she shot the steersman with her arrow. She would not act so rashly and foolishly again, if the Windbirge's crew should ever return.

But they did not come back—nor, perhaps, would they ever have had the chance. Barely eight days after the steersman's death by her arrow, a violent

storm broke loose and drove endless masses of snow over the galley. The wind came out of the northwest and brought a frost almost beyond endurance. The cold crept mercilessly through the thick oak planks of the ship, so that we all crouched together in the galley and still could not get warm, despite the fire in the hearth and the heavy furs in which we were, by fortune, able to wrap ourselves. Through the strong wooden walls of the Windbirge came the howling of the storm and the cracking of ice floes, breaking apart and grinding together on all sides. The whole galley groaned under the pressure of the ice, and we often feared the end had come and the sturdy hull would collapse. I had to recall the permanent watch from the masthead, as they risked freezing to death at their post. No fur, no leg sack, no hood could protect against the icy gale sweeping over us.

We could feel clearly that we were no longer fixed in place but drifting on vast, long waves, for the iceberg swayed with the galley in a slow, gentle rise and fall. We were adrift upon a great floe, but I did not know where. Judging by the wind, we seemed to be drifting deeper into the storm-bay of the Drudenmark, but I could not determine it precisely, since I could not calculate how the lunar tide's pull was affecting the currents—it was always a powerful factor among the driving forces. My deepest wish, of course, was to reach open water, to drift southward, to shed the icy shell and at last reach the Strait of the Sky-Bearer. I had become a seaman and trusted my skill to steer a vessel. And my heart cried out for my son, the Acora Godda. Desperately I clung to the hope that the might of Earth's new companion, the Moon, would one day free us from the icy chains of the Northland and release us toward the South.

Several times a day and night I dared a few steps outside, but each time had to have the companionway dug free from snow and hail, piled high above it. Then the icy, thin air of the storm took my breath away. It was impossible to see more than twenty paces ahead; even the ship could no longer be viewed in its entirety, dissolving forward into the whirlwind of snow and sleet. With a shrill wailing, the storm tore through the frozen rigging, and long banners of snow streamed from the leeward rail into the gray twilight. Amid the cracking of the clashing floes, I could hear the Atlantic sea roar, forcing its way between the frozen slabs and mountains, leaping wildly from the opened rifts. Iceberg and galley boomed from time to time as they struck against other floes; along the starboard rail, heaps of foot-thick frozen slabs piled up, crushing the timberwork beneath their merciless weight. There was nothing for me but to wait grimly and silently, for even this storm must one day pass.

I took the Windbirge's chart case and spread out a map showing the lands and seas of the northern hemisphere, on which the islands of Thule and the northernmost parts of the sunken realm were marked. It became clear to me that the redistribution of land and sea under the tidal power of the moon had gone roughly thus: north of the Strait of the Sky-Bearer the waters of the oceans had fallen, and south of it they had risen. Since the new celestial companion circled

roughly in the plane of Earth's equator—though at a noticeable angle—it was evident that the submergence of the imperial islands near the equator had been caused by the rising of the seas there, while the lowering of the waters observed by Katte Hogger corresponded to the accumulation of mass at the equator.

The mysterious glaciation of Thule now became wholly clear to me. I knew firsthand the formation of ice on the highest mountains of the imperial province Tiahusinju in the Andes, which lay nearly under the sun's zenith—close to the equator. Even there, the thin air of the heights had been unable to shield the peaks from the hard cold of space, and the sun, despite its vertical rays, could not overcome the ice. All the more, then, must the outflow of air masses from the polar regions toward the equator have diminished the Earth's warmth-shield. Over Greenland and the whole northern Thuleland, the air had been drawn southward toward the equator with the appearance of the new moon, and the chill of the Ancient One's cool garden had gained entry to the once-happy green isles of our motherland, Thule.

Without knowing it, the King had given the right command. In the Sea of the Midland Lands lay, as it were, the equilibrium line—or, as I, the mathematician of the Atlantean observatory in Aztlan, would call it, the null-line between the lower and higher levels of water and air. There, in the lands of the Midland Sea, the conditions for life must be bearable for the survivors of the realm; there, perhaps, it would be possible one day to awaken the sunken civilization from its sleep of death. The northern coasts of the Midland Sea thus lay roughly along the boundary of the northern ice—or not far from it. That meant above all the Tyrrhenian lands and Hellas.

Katte Hogger grew curious and wanted to know why I was staring so intently at the old chart. After all, we were in the storm-bay of the Drudenmark, and she knew of better maps—also kept in her father's chart chest. The map case lying before me, she said, contained only a portion of the available hand-drawn plans.

"Fetch them for me, Katte," I said absently.

She did so eagerly, clearly intent on reconciling with me, though by nature I bear no grudges over past mistakes. When I showed no interest in the chart of the storm-bay and set it aside, my mother asked for it and bent over it together with the girl, leaving me to my own thoughts and to my study of the plan of the Earth's northern hemisphere.

When I looked up once, I saw Sir Gerdung's loyal eyes resting upon me. He asked whether I had found something new, for, he said, I looked as if I had discovered the key to the salvation of the realm. No, I had not—but the honorable knight could hardly suspect that a scholar may look equally joyful when he finds a key in another kind of realm: in the mysterious kingdom of the

Ancient One, my old friend and brother in the cosmos, who seems to take a strange delight in setting riddles before men—riddles meant to be solved, mysteries meant to be unveiled.

I tried to explain to my friend Gerdung what I believed I had discovered, to let him share in the bliss of one who uncovers great causes and their effects; but he did not understand. He only smiled kindly. The other men listened politely as the one-eyed helmsman spoke, yet what I said was worlds away from them. Only the carpenter Saland nodded and said that what I told them was right—and had always been right. The companions, he added, should not forget that I had once been a renowned scholar in the service of the King, knowing and understanding more than simple craftsmen and sword-bearers of the realm. But he agreed with me only out of boundless trust.

For him, and for the others as well, the events that surrounded us were nothing but a wonder they could not explain—a necessity whose facts compelled belief. They sought no explanation.

A sadness came over me, and I looked around. Ever lonelier I felt in this overturned world. What did my brave comrades know of the paths of the stars and their nature—of that single force shared by all celestial bodies, gravity, and of the effects of gravity when worlds draw near? Why did I make the futile attempt to impart my knowledge to others who had only goodwill, but could not grasp the meaning of my words?

My old mother had dozed off. She too believed in me and trusted me blindly—indeed, she thought me even more than I truly was. Yet even for her, my knowledge of the stars had always remained a mystery, one reserved only for a few rare and chosen souls; and she was proud that her son was among those few.

Katte Hogger, however, was too young. She had listened to my explanations for a short while, then turned back to her work. She filed and polished gemstones, holding up to the flame of the oil lamp—swinging unsteadily from the low-beamed ceiling of the galley—the object that was to become my artificial eye. She turned her little masterpiece this way and that, so that it shimmered blue and white, and smiled with the joy of a child, pursing her finely curved lips and whistling a soft tune of contentment. She was blissful in her craft—just as I had been moments earlier, before Sir Gerdung's question had drawn me away from my thoughts.

Forsanti was carving the runners of a sled. I had assigned such tasks to my men, since I had to reckon that one day we would have to leave the ship and travel over land. Luhre was cutting the rims of a wheel, for which Saland, the wainwright, had provided the rough base piece. We would need carts and sleds to carry our supplies for the long journey. I could not count on finding any aid in

the Drudenmark—indeed, I doubted that any human group in this time of calamity would be able to help another. The opposite seemed more likely.

Lutbrand, our youngest, was sewing with awl and needle tall walking boots and leather coats from the hides that made up part of the Windbirge's precious cargo, using Saland's broad back to measure the cut of the leather jerkin. Our old garments of cloth and linen were unfit for a journey that might last many years across the land.

I wished there had been more men—and yes, women too, for their skill in many crafts. With a sigh, I thought of Katte Hogger's rash act. I could now have had two strong Atlantean fellows more; they would have served me well both at sea and on land. Katte fell silent and watched me suspiciously—it was as if my unkind thoughts had brushed against her. I looked up and forced a friendly smile. She nodded, reassured, pursed her red lips again, and resumed whistling her tune as before.

Then suddenly, a violent jolt nearly threw us from our seats. The oil lamp swung wildly. Our iceberg had struck ground somewhere and no longer moved. The drifting voyage through the storm had come to an end once again.

Soon, to my sorrow, I realized that the journey had not carried us out into open sea, but deeper into the storm-bay of the Drudenmark. It now seemed ever less likely that I would ever get the Windbirge afloat again—for how was I to free the vessel from its shell of ice and bring it out of the frozen bay? She was still seaworthy, but what use was seaworthiness when there was no open water? Judging by the crashing and groaning of the ice outside, all the evil Alben—the spirits of frost—had been loosed, and hour by hour I expected the strong oak hull of the galley to splinter beneath the pressure of the floes.

Long I lay awake in my hammock, listening. Katte Hogger had, as usual, placed a jug of warm water by my mother's bed, and this time she had also given me a heated clay shard so that the old Godda Apacheta would not feel the ache in his joints.

Soon after midnight, the storm subsided. The deafening crash of the ice ceased, and the silence that followed was almost eerie. Yet one thing I knew: the ship had held.

Although it was very difficult for me to rise from the soft bed with its artificial warmth, I forced myself up and made my way alone through the snow-blocked hatchway to the outside. A few stars flickered in the black sky, then vanished again. The wind still blew strongly, yet it could almost be called warm compared to the icy gale of the past days and nights. Somewhere behind drifting clouds stood the Moon, the destroyer of the realm—I could tell by the pale light spread over the ice field. The galley had again been lifted by the pressure of the

floes. The deck was clear, though the starboard railing had been dented and scraped away—where the rising ice had struck, it had caused heavy damage.

I stepped to the edge of the ship and peered downward, for I thought I saw movement. Not far from me, below on the ice field, two glowing points shone in the dim light of night, staring up at me. I seized a broken piece of railing and hurled it toward the glowing spots.

They vanished—and I knew then that animals were near the ship, foxes or wolves, at least one of them. That meant the land must be close, and that reaching it might be possible—even for men.

For the safety of the ship and our small crew, I roused Luhre and ordered him to take the watch at the lookout. He grumbled when I pulled him from his warm bedding, but I clapped him on the shoulder and said he might mutter quietly, yet he must obey. The appearance of the wolf by the galley was a clear warning. Just as the beasts had found their way to the merchant Hogger's ship, so might human wolves also succeed. I was thinking not so much of the former Windbirge crew as of other wandering bands of refugees. It was hardly to be assumed that the Drudenmark had been completely depopulated by the glaciation.

If the lunar tide had driven the sea-ice southward as far as the Strait of the Sky-Bearer—into relatively warmer zones of the Atlantic—it was because of the fluid mobility of water and the ice floating upon it. Therefore, it was by no means necessary that the landmasses at the same latitude must also be frozen. In fact, I hoped and expected to find, on our journey through the southern Druden region, certain islands of life free of ice—perhaps sheltered valleys or sunward slopes along ridges. After all, animals still lived here, as I had seen myself—and they, like humans, needed food and warmth.

In any case, I was resolved to maintain a constant watch from now on, to be ready for any surprise that might come from an enemy. And in our time of peril, all—men and beasts alike—were potential enemies.

I now often sat bent over the land maps that Katte Hogger had fetched me from her father's chart chest. Naturally, the sea charts were more numerous and detailed than the maps of the land, yet I succeeded in assembling and fitting together a series of maps that encompassed the territories from the Drudenmark to Hellas. The interior of the Drudenmark as well as of Teutenland had indeed been surveyed by our royal cartographers, but these markings only covered large territorial regions, recording major sacred sites at vast intervals of miles.

However, since I expected significant changes in the shape of the land—and above all a considerable displacement of seas and rivers—and since I was convinced that wide stretches of Teutenland, especially in the north, had

been seized by the advancing Ice Age, I did not trouble myself greatly about the inaccuracy of these maps. It was enough for me to discern the general direction on the chart that led toward Hellas.

For it was out of the question, with our meager means, to cross the immense frozen mountains lying to the south of the Drudenmark and Teutenland. Yet I could hope that the mountain ranges bounding Hellas to the north would be free of ice, thanks to their southern position. My experience with mountain marches in the Andes of the Mark Tiahusinju had been sufficient that I could trust myself to overcome lesser heights than those.

"Lord Duke Godda," said Katte Hogger softly one day, after she had long left me undisturbed in my study of the maps. I looked up in surprise. The young woman, by addressing me as "Duke," perhaps wished to show that she had grown tame? Yet it was hard for me to believe in Katte's tameness. There was also a hint of irony in her words—never malicious, of course, given her naturally gracious manner. I knew quite well that I would still have many a skirmish to fight with this fiery young woman; and yet, precisely because of her proud independence, I found her not at all displeasing.

"Your duke is listening," I replied solemnly, and my mother, who sat nearby, smiled once more. She had completely fallen under Katte Hogger's spell—and I must honestly admit that the same had happened to me.

"I'd like to try fitting your eye, Lord Godda," said Lady Katte, turning the glittering, assembled gemstone this way and that. "It's not quite finished yet, but I need to know whether I must grind the agate's edges down further. The stone mustn't press or chafe you. It doesn't look like it, but the empty, eerie hollow beneath your brow is so large that I really ought to sew it smaller."

Katte Hogger spoke of sewing smaller my eye socket as though she had performed such procedures many times before. Without waiting for my reply, she took my head in her hands and fitted the artificial eye beneath my brow. As she did so, she added that she would cut my long gray locks as well—they didn't look nice, she said—or at least I should take better care of them.

Yes, Katte was right. Back in Aztlan, when I had been a respected scholar and my king's companion, surrounded by comfort and outward fortune, I had tended my "locks," as Katte liked to call the gray strands. The hardships of this endless winter had made me careless. My hair, bleached by weather and wind, was now combed through hastily in the morning—if at all—and perhaps even that small vanity would have ceased had there not been women aboard.

The artificial eye was still somewhat too large, but it sat firmly enough in the socket. Katte held a bronze mirror before my face so I might admire my new beauty. So—this young woman also possessed a mirror! How long it had

been since I last saw my reflection! And only six years ago I would have thought it impossible to live without such a thing. Yet I examined my face with great curiosity; I scarcely remembered what I looked like.

"Old Godda," Katte had often called me. And indeed, she was right. Next to her smooth, blossoming youth, I was an old, worn man—deep lines furrowing my lean, tight-lipped face, fine wrinkles about my one good eye, and rune-like creases across my brow where the almost white hair swept back carelessly. Around my chin grew a white-gray beard tapering to a point, poorly tended. Once, under the high culture of the realm, I had been clean-shaven daily, and a hair-artist saw to my neat appearance. Now, Katte's mirror showed me an aged, careworn duke, who had little left in common with Godda Apacheta of Aztlan but the name.

Yet one thing startled me deeply. The artificial eye changed my face greatly. The gemstone sat large and gleaming beneath the brow bone, as though it truly belonged there—but my living eye had a wholly different light, though the blue of the stone matched it not badly. The strange, alien look came, of course, from the dead, unblinking stare of the false eye. Lady Katte could not give it life, nor make it move. It was too large besides, and she had rightly said she would have to "sew my eye socket smaller."

She drew the skin at the corner of my eye over the gem and examined it critically, saying that she had never seen such a handsome duke before. It would not hurt, she assured me, when she stitched me, for my mother still had a small supply of coca for numbing.

I nodded. Yes—my mother still had some coca left in her medicine chest. But how soon, I thought, would the last remnants of our ancient civilization be consumed and scattered to the winds? Then I too would become a mere creature of man, with only the simplest needs. Even Katte Hogger would lose her delicate complexion, and her fine, well-kept fingernails would become rough and cracked.

The young woman fetched a pair of scissors and sat down beside me again. I thought she intended to trim the artificial eye with that monstrous thing, and I clenched my teeth in readiness. She noticed and laughed. No, she said, she was only going to cut my hair, and I needn't grit my teeth and play the hero who doesn't even say "Ow" when something hurts. She, for her part, always said "Ow" in such cases—it really helped, she explained.

While Katte was busy restoring my head to its "new beauty," my mother asked when I planned to unload the ship. She had seen enough, she said, to realize that it was hopelessly trapped in the pack ice near the shore and would never be freed. I replied that I did not intend to rush the departure; without careful preparation I would not begin the march toward Hellas. I was in the

enviable position of having at my disposal the well-stocked stores of Hogger's galley, allowing us to make our land equipment with great precision and completeness. Others on the devastated earth likely lacked such means. Success, I said, depended upon thorough preparation and good equipment—and I was determined to seek out my royal friend along the coasts of the Sea of the Middle Lands. To accomplish that, I must not act hastily.

Katte found life aboard the Windbirge dreadfully boring. That pleased me somewhat, for I needed people for the march to Hellas who possessed a taste for adventure—and who would not cling too fondly to the comforts of a ship's warm cabins.

"What a handsome old duke we have!" said Katte, inspecting the results of her haircutting. My old mother was offended and made a face. Her son, she said, was not so old! Katte adopted an innocent expression and smiled a little.

My gaze happened by chance to fall on Sir Gerdung von Gaardepoort, who years ago had brought my black scholar's cloak to Atlanta Framer, believing I had fallen to an arrow's death. Since then he had become my faithful friend and comrade-in-arms, and I loved him for his calm steadiness, his strength of will, and his firm yet kind authority over those under him. Now I saw his enraptured eyes resting upon Katte Hogger's pale face. It was natural enough—this slender, girlish woman must have warmed the heart of the quiet, noble man.

"Godda Apacheta, your lord king pleased me exceedingly," said Katte, after she had removed my gemstone eye again and was filing delicately at the agate's edges. "The last Blink-message we received from the king reached us in Vingat about six years ago—it came from Atlantis, from the Central Solar Observatory of the realm. But at that time, Lord Balder, who visited us aboard the Windbirge before the royal galley drifted southward, was not yet the ruler of Atlantis."

I told Katte how it had come to pass that my royal friend escaped destruction, though his father—who ruled in Atlantis—had perished with the realm in the floods. At that time my lord had still been Acora, the crown prince of the realm, and he had been on a journey to the highlands of Tiahusinju, that great borderland adjoining the lands of the Cuzcos and Zipangu. The lunar tide had not reached such mountain heights, and thus many Atlanteans who happened to be there had escaped death—among them King Balder and myself, as well as Sir Gerdung, the wheelwright Saland, and Forsanti, Luhre, and Lutbrand, who now lived aboard the Windbirge with us.

Had my mother not told her all this?

Yes, she had—but Katte Hogger wanted to hear from me how the new celestial body, the Moon, had managed to destroy an entire mighty empire in a single night. My mother had tried to explain, she said, but she had not understood.

I tried patiently to make it clear, though I often felt that the more time passed since that great catastrophe, the less people seemed able to comprehend it. I told her that when the new Moon appeared, its gravity—its power of attraction, which the Earth too possesses—had drawn the waters of the oceans toward the equator. That was why, I said, the sea level had fallen in Greenland, just as she herself had described, and why the old shoreline had seemed to rise out of the sea before her very eyes. But through the bulging of the waters at the equator, the Realm of Atlantis, with its low-lying islands, had been submerged beneath the Atlantic Ocean and drowned—and scarcely a soul could have survived, save those who happened to be far out at sea.

Katte replied that the government must have known of the danger, for on Atlantis they had sent their warning signal to the solar observatory at Stolthange in Greenland. Her father had told her that—but had also said it was probably untrue. And when the disaster finally came, there had been no time left for warnings.

I nodded. The observatories of the realm could only have sent warnings that the new star was approaching the Earth in a threatening manner—nothing more could have been done. Now all of that was gone and forgotten: the realm, the observatories, and the knowledge of tens of thousands of years. Already it sounded like a legend when one spoke of Atlantis, only six years after its downfall. Those six years of hardship and sorrow had numbed memory itself; people could hardly believe it had ever been otherwise, and the young looked upon the old with reverent awe.

We old ones had lived in that legendary realm—had walked the streets of the city where the palace walls were of gold, and the halls of the All-Father's estate were of alabaster and gems. We had crossed the bridges arcing from ring-city to ring-city across the concentric canals; we had seen the bustling harbors with their thousands of ships, the war fleet with its slender, swift galleys; we had attended the imperial academies and passed our examinations; we had served as reserve officers in the royal army.

Yes—all of it had now become a myth! Too great was the gulf that the Earth's catastrophe had torn between yesterday and today.

Katte Hogger seemed to grasp, at least in part, what I meant about the flooding of the realm caused by the Moon's gravity—but I still doubted she could truly picture the immensity of those events.

Later, when I stood on deck speaking with Sir Gerdung about sending out a small scouting expedition—a journey of several days over land to explore the valleys beyond the snowy hills—he asked me whether he might seek Katte Hogger's hand in marriage.

I answered at once that he should try his luck, though the question and its answer struck me like a knife in the heart. Still, I was wise enough to renounce the young woman immediately—especially since she herself liked to call me an old man. I knew well her affection for me, but I rightly took it to be that of a young girl toward a man a generation her elder, whose old-fashioned chivalry seemed like a half-forgotten song from bygone years—one that echoes tenderly in the hearts of children.

I asked Sir Gerdung to let me know Katte's answer as soon as he had it. I did not hide from him that I was very eager to hear it, for I had the impression that Katte Hogger was much attached to my mother and me and, at least for the time being, did not want to hear of a new marriage. She had had terrible experiences on the Windbirge and, as Sir Gerdung knew, had belonged to several men—probably because the one she had chosen had not had the courage to protect her against the bestial drives of the ship's crew. And since he had not done so as a husband, Katte still wanted today to fell her man with her shooting-gear. Perhaps it would be good if Sir Gerdung asked very cautiously and allowed the inwardly shattered Katte at least time to think and to grow accustomed. That he should woo in the most knightly and gentle fashion, that I knew, I said at the end.

"What about you, Your Grace?" Gerdung then asked.

"I have little prospect," I smiled at my friend.

"Katte has captured me as well, I freely admit, and I believe my brave lads all adore the young woman. For me an openly shown infatuation would be comical, therefore I keep away from Katte. You are fifteen years younger than I. That can be heard when one wants to marry. But I advise great caution. Katte Hogger has gone through all human depths and is now dragging herself up again. You have surely seen it as well as I. Try it." We said no more about Katte after that.

Gerdung wanted to accompany me on the scouting trip. At first he opposed my leaving the ship as duke, but then he saw that the Windbirge was a craft that had no hope of cruising the Atlantic again, and that it would be enough if I handed command on board to Saland. We agreed that we would make the overland journey alone and that we would take only the small sled that had meanwhile been finished. We felt it a bitter lack that our band of men was so small.

"Perhaps we will be able to find other Atlanteans who will join us," said Sir Gerdung.

I hoped so too, though my expectations were not very high.

Late at night, long after midnight, Katte Hogger came into my captain's cabin without knocking. I was sleeping and at first did not know who crouched on the edge of my berth, for it was almost dark in the cabin and the little oil lamp burned with a tiny wick.

"Well, Katte Hogger?" I asked, half asleep.

"Your mother has allowed me to come to you, Godda Apacheta," she replied.

Katte looked like a small brown bear in her full fur cloak, almost spherical, and her eyes shone from the dark corner of the berth like those of a predator.

"So your mother allowed it," I said amusedly. "Then all is well."

"Yes, and now I beg you to let me stay here so that you may have something to allow," Katte answered in the same tone. She spoke very quietly because the wooden walls of the captain's cabin were not thick enough. Sir Gerdung von Gaardepoort had asked her whether she would give him an answer… and then it all spilled out—the same thing I had already heard in my talk with the knight. I told her that my friend Gerdung had made the proposal with my knowledge. What had she answered him?

"I told him I still have one man, and I must first kill him, but that's my business and I will do it myself and will burden no one with my own shame," the young woman replied, and I was astonished at the matter-of-fact way the child treated the thought of murder. That she told me the thing in curt words showed me how convinced she was that she would, at the next opportunity, kill her man with her sure arrow.

"So you gave Sir Gerdung no promise, Katte?" I asked, and I confess my heart beat at the thought, because I had the prospect of keeping this young creature a while longer.

"No," she said firmly. "I love you and want to stay with you and your mother, even if you do not want me as a wife. I've had enough of men and can stay with you without marrying you. Maybe you can take me like a child, Godda Apacheta, and you would then have much to educate in Katte Hogger—more than you'd like. Isn't that very immodest? You know, Lord Godda, I'm washed in all waters, I am so familiar with the matters of so-called love, that I simply

want to seduce you—or at least try. But because you treated me as a noble girl, I will not esteem you less for it and will keep my learned arts to myself. I told your mother that, by the way. I have lied to you at times, Godda Apacheta, but not to get anything from you; I lied because I could not and would not tell you everything that is very bad and hard for a girl to speak of. Today, however, I have told you the truth."

I was silent a while, then answered that I could and would not comment on her reply to Sir Gerdung, but that I was not exactly angry that things had turned out as she had told me. And she should make herself leave my cabin now, otherwise it might happen that the old Apacheta would suddenly, in the morning, take Katte Hogger as his wife and then scarcely know how it had come to pass.

Then the young woman laughed—a bright, triumphant laugh that showed her shining teeth, the laughter of a girl who had won.

"So that's how things stand with you, Herr Godda!" she said softly, her voice carrying a note of exultation. "Then I shall sharpen my widow's arrow! First, I'll clear the way—for you and me. Must I go now?"

"Yes," I answered, though my heart beat heavy and hard.

"Your voice is hoarse, Godda," Katte said with a deep sigh.
"I never realized how beautiful your voice sounds when it's hoarse. All of a sudden, I have no desire to go back to my cabin!"

"Katte, you must go," I declared firmly, and my voice grew steady again. I would not let this fiery young girl keep all the advantage.

"How old are you, Godda Apacheta?" she asked, as though she had not heard my command.

I said I was fifty-five years old—but enough of that, I added; she should go to my mother, else the old woman might worry.

"She won't worry," Katte laughed. "She's on my side this time, not yours, Herr Herzog. I made sure of that. Even if I'm not as clever as you, I'm still shrewder. Your mother says she must die one day, and for lack of better women she's chosen the 'fallen' Katte Hogger to take her place. We women can't imagine that a man like you should go through life without supervision! That I'm thirty-seven years younger than you is unfortunate, perhaps—but in these confused, overturned times, everything is different from before. And perhaps one day you'll be quite content that you took me as your wife. For despite my waywardness, I'm at heart a good creature, and I know I can be faithful—and even decent. It likely displeases you that I harbor thoughts of murder as a young woman; maybe I even frighten you a little because I speak of

love so coolly, even with a hint of irony. Dear Godda, I wasn't like this once—only during the long hardship of the drift voyage did I become so. I know too much now. And I value myself too much today to lie. A year and a half of shame is a long time for a young girl who was still half-a-child when she first gave herself to a man. Much has awakened in me that one would understand and forgive at once in an older woman. But you shall see how Katte Hogger will cling to you. I am neither stupid nor blind, and your years don't frighten me. Can I not be at once your daughter? And your sister, too, even as your wife? For your wife I'd gladly be—far more gladly than you imagine, for I want to have many children by you. Yes, I'm already moving down to the foot of the bed—I'm already on the verge of leaving, Godda Apacheta. Just hold me for one moment more…"

I rose and reached for her. Katte tried to press herself deeper into the corner of the bed, but I caught her up, lifted the bundle of furs in my arms, and set it gently outside the door. Then I closed the narrow hatch, drew the bolt, and drew a long breath. Outside, the young woman stirred herself; the door to my mother's cabin closed—and all was still.

My heart pounded up into my throat. I had always known that this slender, delicate child was dangerous—very dangerous—but that night I knew for certain that I had forgiven Atlanta Framer, and given my heart and senses over to Katte Hogger. I stood in a new age, and Atlantis was gone. Never had I felt that truth so sharply and painfully as in the night when Katte Hogger had sat upon my bed.

My mother came very early to share the morning meal with me. She knew Katte had been with me in the night and said, in her quiet, playful way, that the young woman had talked about me for so long that even a mother had at last had enough—though, surely, a mother could never tire of hearing about her son! She had fallen asleep, she said, in the middle of Katte's storytelling—though the tale concerned her own Godda. Now Katte still slept soundly and looked, she said, like a child who had been given a great gift. Would I mind, she asked, if today she joined our hands together, so that we might become comrades for the hard life ahead of us?

I replied that I had understood Katte Hogger differently. She did indeed wish to have me for her husband, that was true—and she had gone about it cleverly and with full attack. But she did not intend it immediately. First she wished to set things right—to kill her husband, against whom she bore a deep and bitter hatred. I could well imagine it was justified. My mother likely knew more and in greater detail. Still, I said, it did not sit well with me to stand by coldly while an Atlantean man was simply shot down without trial or hearing. I might now rule a little state of my own, small as it was, but I still wished its highest law to be discipline and justice.

"Katte herself proposed," my mother said, "that you capture and question some of the men and women of the Windbirge. She told me, too, that she had lied to you when she first met you on the ice, and she does not expect you to believe her completely. But she is not afraid—she only wants clarity and a clean slate, in all things, especially in matters concerning you and her. That pleased me, Godda. A fierce pride has kept Katte Hogger from spiritual ruin. Now she is cruel and relentless toward those who tried to destroy her. I think she is right to be so. In your love, she will grow gentle. I believe I know it."

Then Katte came in. This time she knocked. She was completely at ease and, as always, gave me her small, firm hand in greeting. I confess I blushed like a young lad, which I did not find pleasant. Katte laughed at me when she saw it and was merciless enough to comment on it. "It's so infinitely beautiful when an old man blushes for my sake," she said. But she allowed me the satisfaction of seeing the same thing happen to her. Dark blood rose under her white skin and made her confused; it took her a long time to recover. I spoke with my mother and was glad that I, as a man, was not as cruel as Katte Hogger.

"I want to go with you and Sir Gerdung on the scouting trip," she said abruptly.

I shook my head and looked at her cautiously. The flush had faded. She answered that she had expected me to say no, but she suspected we would come across traces of the Windbirge's deserters, probably even the people themselves. And there she wanted to parley, because her arrow-shot at the helmsman had set up mortal enmity between my men and those of her father's galley. She wanted to make good on that. And if I wished it, she would even let her husband go. That was more than I could expect, she said, and she would do it only to show that she could submit. She had suffered greatly when I scolded her, even though she had not shown it.

"You? — and Sir Gerdung?" I asked doubtfully.

She explained that precisely because Sir Gerdung would be coming and because she liked him, she wanted to be present. She wanted to speak with him, and there would be ample opportunity in the evenings when the scouting party made camp. She begged me earnestly not to forbid it, because then she would have to obey.

I looked at my mother, and she nodded. The women were probably right. At the very least, an undisturbed conversation with my friend Gerdung would be beneficial. That Katte Hogger might be unequal to a march like the one I intended did not occur to me. After all, one day I would have to take my old mother on a long journey in the same direction, bearing burdens similar to those of the scouting party. We did not speak of marriage. That was settled. But first the reckoning with her husband had to take place—he had narrowly escaped

death from his wife's arrow back then. When I fell silent in thought, Katte guessed what I was thinking and declared that her husband had shown himself cowardly. He had had the chance to join with her father to protect her, and yet she herself had still been there! But he had not done it; out of fear he had delivered her to the helmsman and watched her being bound when she resisted. I should not be angry, she said; she was not cruel, not even vengeful, although she had once told me she was—but she wanted to live and to live decently. For that reason she had to be hard toward those who had nearly destroyed her life out of disgust. I would see for myself. Did I still want her to bring in the women and the Windbirge men?

Yes, I said, provided I found them. She replied that that suited her. And if I were the supreme judge of my little band, she would submit to my verdict.

I was continually amazed by this young woman. She was only eighteen yet wise as a mature man. She spoke confidently and made no vague statements as young people sometimes do, for which one might blame them. She was, in fact, uncanny. At times it seemed to me her youth had vanished in the year and a half of humiliation and hardship, while at other moments her bubbling childishness delighted me.

I told her she should come with us.

Sir Gerdung and I pulled the sled, while the young woman, with her weapon slung at her side, went on far ahead, scouting behind every hill and scanning the distance. Her sharp, clear eyes never rested; they searched tirelessly in every direction—no doubt for her enemies, the former comrades of her ship. I smiled to myself, for I no longer believed that the Windbirge men could appear here again.

Once, Lady Katte waited for us and said:

"Lord Duke Godda, are not those mountains there in the south much lower than they were thirty days ago?"

I replied that she had observed correctly—we were now far from the place where the helmsman had fallen, and thus also far from her other foes. She would likely find it easy this time to obey old Godda Apacheta.

"Your mother forbade me to call you old, so I ask you now to obey her just once yourself," she laughed.

We left the ice current at the edge of the frontal wall, and suddenly we stood upon green grass!

It was so startling and overwhelming that we stopped instinctively. We would have halted anyway, for the sled had grown heavy and unwieldy—its runners no longer slid.

I looked around. Far behind us on the horizon stood the tiny image of the galley, perched atop a high ice-hill, its stern lifted proudly into the clear summer air. Before us stretched a rolling hill-country, dotted with some snow-covered peaks. In the far south, mighty ice mountains rose into the heavens, their lower slopes resting on green and gray meadows, on dark forests and brown screes; white glaciers thrust down through ravines and valleys far into the plains. Countless streams ran through the divided land, and when I compared the larger of them with those on my map, I could find no resemblance, although the Atlantean charts had been most accurate in the coastal regions of the imperial marches.

All these rivers and rivulets flowed toward the storm-bay, that is, to the sea, and between the ice-fields they had carved wide channels through which part of the waters could escape. Still, the ice-barriers acted like enormous dams, so that one broad lake succeeded another toward the lowlands. Since the entire system of rivers and lakes flowed eastward—against the direction of our march—I saw, to my regret, that I would be forced, at least for the present, to give up traveling by water. There was still too much of the sailor in me from my voyages across the ocean, and whenever I thought of a journey, I thought of waterways.

To my delight, however, the landscape was not dead, as I had feared in my darker moments of doubt. It teemed with the birds of Thule, which had fled here and, in number, far outmatched the native species. That afternoon we also saw reindeer grazing, and in a marshy hollow a herd of wild boars. But of human beings we found no trace on this first day of our journey.

The slopes to the southeast were forested. My heart grew light and glad. The glaciation of the northern lands did not seem so desolate here in the southern Drudenmark; at least in these latitudes, during summer, life still seemed possible. This hopeful confidence I would not surrender, even when it grew very cold toward late afternoon. The chill, I thought, was merely the breath of the nearby ice-fields of the Druden Bay.

Not long after we set foot on the solid ground of the southern Drudenmark, the friendly grassy earth startled us with a series of strong tremors. I had been at sea so long that I had nearly forgotten what life was like on this new earth — that earthquakes had become almost a daily affair. These tremors, to be sure, were not to be compared with the mighty shocks I had experienced on the heights of Tiahusinju when the new moon was caught in the Earth's gravity. Yet they were still uncanny enough to stir that unease which always accompanies such movements. One no longer quite trusts the old, firm earth

when they come often — and one never fully grows used to it. Katte Hogger, who knew earthquakes from Greenland but had forgotten them during our long drift, was badly frightened, but she proved brave and laughed when I did. I knew that such light tremors could not harm us so long as we were in the open, and so we continued our march.

Sir Gerdung, in a valley hollow, discovered traces of old plowing, though no plow had turned the soil there in many months. Weeds mingled with withered vegetables grew wild on the field, and near it stood a crude, stone-built structure without a roof, still blackened by fire inside.

We also found human bones, scattered and gnawed by wild beasts. Here the desperate struggle of men had raged — men who had become robbers because the harsh Axe Age had forced them to commit what once, in days of high culture, would have been considered abominable crimes. Though the sun still stood in the sky, I decided we should remain within the square of walls, for it offered shelter from the cold wind. We took turns earnestly trying to kindle a flame with flint, hard bronze, and rotted wood, but had to admit that the gift of fire — once so commonplace — would henceforth be a precious rarity.

Katte Hogger would not give up. She tried again and again, and I rejoiced at her persistence. She seemed to feel responsible for a warm supper, and she blew tirelessly upon the stubborn sparks that refused to catch. Meanwhile, I sat on the threshold of the old farmhouse and used the remaining daylight to record my notes. A ship's master is accustomed to keeping a log, but I was now miserly with the few sheets of leather I still possessed and confined myself to brief entries. I did not yet alter the map, for I still did not know exactly where in the Drudenland we had made landfall.

While I still scribbled, glancing now and then down the valley, Katte suddenly gave a cry of joy and stood by the hearth, arms raised high. A moment later she seized Sir Gerdung by the arm and pulled him to the stone hearth.

"Blow!" she commanded breathlessly.

I turned. Sir Gerdung crouched before the stones, blowing with full lungs into a tiny flame that Katte's patience had coaxed to life. But the young woman was exhausted by her effort; she lay down on the ground, tugged at my knee until her head rested there comfortably, and nestled her fair, blond head against it. Katte had had enough for this first day's march into the Drudenland — the strain of kindling that tiny spark had doubled her weariness. She was a sweet child, and yet a soul who had endured the bitterest trials a northern woman could face. And now, as she lay beside me, breathing softly in her sleep, she was again only a child — a child who had won her first triumph within the harsh confines of a primitive life.

The fire burned! Katte Hogger had brought forth flame! Katte Hogger was worth something. She had accomplished something that demanded acknowledgment. She could do more than polish gemstones in the safe cabin for the one-eyed Godda Apacheta — she was more than a toy of shameless men, more than the dishonored daughter of the wealthy merchant Hogger of Vingat in Greenland.

Katte Hogger had kindled fire for her comrades and friends! The joy of her achievement lay across her pale features like a gentle beam of light as I gazed down at her with tender devotion. Darkness fell upon the strange land, but behind us burned the small, warm flame that would bring us wanderers between ice and steppe comfort — and often salvation — through many long and bitter years.

Katte slept so deeply that with Sir Gerdung's help I could lift her into the sleeping-bag, its fur-lined interior protecting her from the night cold. She half woke and muttered like a child that we should leave her be — she wanted to sleep. Then Sir Gerdung bent over her and kissed her on the mouth.

"Thank you, Godda Apacheta," she murmured, and Sir Gerdung looked at me with a quiet smile.

No — this noble man would not let the friendship we had forged on Acora Island be broken. Still, I could turn my back to him without fear of betrayal. Who else on this shattered Earth had such friends as Godda Apacheta, the Star-Wise of Aztlan?

The young woman was soon breathing evenly again. She scarcely noticed that we had wrapped her in warm furs. In the dim glow of the hearth flame we men sat beside Katte Hogger and gazed at her as at a wondrous sight. That night we understood how immeasurably vital the presence of women is for men oppressed by hardship — how infinite a treasure the possession of a single maiden can be for a small, fate-stricken people.

We kept watch by turns that night, to prevent the flame from going out, and again and again we stopped before the shapeless bundle from which only a blond lock peeked out, where the braid of the young woman had come slightly loose. We looked at that lock in turn, as if we had never seen a sleeping-bag before.

Sir Gerdung took the first watch, standing guard with shield and spear at the entrance. I could not fall asleep at once, for I was thinking about the strange drift of the ice, which continued even over the land.

"I'm hungry," said Katte Hogger suddenly.

So she had awakened. I might have expected it — while she slept, we men had warmed some of our provisions but had saved her share. Sir Gerdung knelt beside her sleeping-bag and fed her without a word. I could see clearly how his serious face softened with a gentle smile.

"You are very good to me, Sir Gerdung," I heard Katte's quiet voice say. They both must have thought I was asleep.

"I do it gladly," the knight replied.

"And I, wicked creature, have caused you such pain," said the girl after a pause. "But I cannot marry two men — I will not. Believe me, Sir Gerdung, I have lived through hard times. But now... now I love Godda Apacheta."

Those words sounded to my old ears like a soft, trembling song, for I had never thought that a woman—much less a young woman—could ever again be kind to me, an ugly, one-eyed man.

"Make his hard office lighter, Lady Katte," said Gerdung.

I was truly a happy man! When that reserved and honorable knight spoke those words, they were meant for now and forever. I saw how his tall figure straightened, how he went to the hearth to tend the flame, and how he then slowly walked to the entrance, where his silhouette stood against the bright night sky like a steadfast fortress.

When he came to wake me four hours later, I was still awake; but how could I sleep, after hearing the woman I loved speak softly of her love for me?

Later things between Katte and me took a strange course. She had wanted to wait until she had settled accounts with her first husband—but he had vanished and remained so. The drifting ice had carried us far apart, and we never again saw that man or the other members of the Windbirge's crew. Thus Katte became my wife—without my mother laying our hands together, without ceremony, without the consent of any kin or friends. The time of hardship on the northern ice-frontier bound us together by its own power. We made no vows, as was customary in marriage—and such vows are not always kept anyway. Katte also became my daughter, because she wished it so; she became my comrade, my battle-companion, my friend in hunting and travel. Often I marveled that all this worked so well, for I was old beside her; yet she did not grow old, and she made me young again. She became the duchess of my tiny wandering folk—no better one could I have wished—and she remained my wise duchess as my power grew through the years, and as I gained women for my men. She was a blessing and a joy to my old mother.

The fine late-summer day in the ruined walls of that Druden farmhouse had deceived us—or rather, it had warned us. Toward morning, while I kept watch, it began to snow—soft, thick flakes that melted quickly on the ground. It grew wretchedly uncomfortable in the stone building, for the roof was gone. True, our leather garments protected us somewhat from the damp, but the longing for the dry, warm cabin of the Windbirge crept into our hearts. We were still spoiled, like people of a high, mature civilization, even though six years had taught us to adapt.

Our remaining resources had become ever fewer. We had lived on the remnants of what we had saved—and those remnants would now dwindle year by year. We still possessed weapons and tools of hardened bronze, that famed metal of Atlantis—the "copper gold" that had aided us greatly as warriors in winning our world dominion. The finely forged helmets still sat upon our heads, though here and there the eagle-wings that once adorned them were broken off, for we needed the metal for more urgent purposes. We still wore the excellently sewn and carefully tanned fur cloaks from the Hogger inheritance; our garments and linen came from the stores of the Windbirge—the legacy of Atlantean culture. We still had well-stitched and decorated gloves from the same source. From the ship's stock we had oak shields with bronze fittings, hardened spear-points, bronze hauberks and greaves; we still possessed axes of metal and sturdy spades from good Thulian workshops. But soon—through wear and loss—we would be forced to make new weapons and new tools, and those, I well knew, would be of stone, or of bone and antler from deer and reindeer.

Our knowledge of the composition of our hardened bronze was of no use to us, for we lacked both the high-grade coals and the apparatus needed to feed hot, excess air to the fire in order to melt the metal. Perhaps bronze could one day be rediscovered—conquered anew, so to speak—but for us wanderers at the ice-bound frontier of Thule, such fortune would surely be denied. At too primitive a cultural level, such inventions are indeed possible, yet their practical use becomes so difficult that one must usually do without them.

I picked up Katte Hogger's weapon from the ground and examined it thoughtfully. It was damp from the falling snow, and I wiped it clean again and again with care. Two springy limbs of yellowish ivory were joined by a bronze bridge into a finely curved bow. Upon that bridge, in the most skillful repoussé work, was depicted a hunting scene of men and beasts—raised in rounded relief, perfect in form and execution. The weapon's power was remarkable, as I had once already witnessed when Katte had slain the Windbirge's helmsman. And I was to have many more occasions to behold the force of that delicate weapon, whose arrows pierced even the hard bronze of helmets!

The next bows we would fashion could only be made of ash or oak, and it was more than doubtful that we could afford to adorn them with any such artistic carvings.

The snow slowly turned to rain. I woke Sir Gerdung, and then Lady Katte. They were astonished at how harsh the weather had become, but Katte Hogger was full of praise for my caution in guarding our precious fire. For when the first flakes had begun to fall, I had overturned our laboriously dragged sled above the hearth as a shelter. Now smoke coiled out from beneath the improvised roof and proved that we might even warm our morning meal.

The hilly landscape, which but moments before had been white, turned green again; yet in the bushes and small woods that clothed the slopes nearby, the leaves glowed rust-red. What we had not noticed in the night, sheltered by the ruined walls and the fire, was now visible outside—the leaves had suffered from the cold.

Once more the singing swans flew southward, but they veered out to sea, evidently to avoid the flight route over the tall, ice-bound southern border ranges of the Drudenmark leading toward Iberia. The same, no doubt, was done by all the birds we had seen—even at sea we had encountered them—all flying wide around the deadly mountains.

I watched the swans thoughtfully. Could the short summer already be at an end? If so, I could no longer think of a voyage to Hellas this autumn. And what would the long winters be like? Well—that was a concern for later. They, too, would have to be endured, and the means and ways to do so we would surely find.

Other flocks passed overhead as we stood together within our ring of walls, sipping hot broth we had brought from the Windbirge. We had been fortunate that migrating fowl sometimes became our prey and thus did not always have to consume the frozen stores from the ship's provisions. We still ate almost daily from the meat that had been loaded onto the Windbirge six years before—and it was as fresh as if it had only just been taken from the slaughterhouse. Frost, then, was not always our enemy—it had often made life itself possible for us. Yet we rejoiced whenever we could taste fresh meat, and our scouting expedition thus served the hunt as well.

We decided to leave our sled and sleeping-bags within the shelter of our ruined walls and march another half-day eastward, then return—unless we found a better refuge, one above all drier. A man can endure cold and damp for a while, but soon the body's resistance wanes quickly. It was therefore a necessity to seek dry shelter.

On this trek we suddenly encountered roe deer. Katte Hogger, however, was always ready to shoot; she practically waited for such encounters ever since she had seen the grazing reindeer. Like flashing lightning her keen arrows sped toward the quarry, fired from close range and therefore very effective. The game

scattered in terror. Apparently this area had not been disturbed for a long time and perhaps had therefore let down its usual caution toward humans. We, however, were in possession of two strong horned stags that were in prime condition. Katte looked like a little queen, full of childish pride over her success, as the hunters of Thule call it. We held a quarter-hour's vigil over the fallen beasts and then continued our march, constantly expecting to meet people or at least human tracks. That day we found nothing and turned back around midday. It was already snowing again.

Had summer in the southern Drudenland really already ended? Was the harsh winter coming now because the sun had moved toward its southern turning point and the thin air over the Thule lands with its oblique rays could no longer warm sufficiently?

At our kill—well covered with brush and branches—we found a shaggy bear that had already begun to cut into both bucks. It was certainly very hungry and paid us no heed; in any case it would not be disturbed in its meal. Katte Hogger was hasty and shot at the predator with her hunting gear, and she hit it in a place I do not care to describe; I will only say that when we arrived the bear presented us with its hindquarters. In any event the girl later had to endure much teasing from us men. For the moment we had no time for mockery. The bear spun around and snapped with a bloodied maw at the shaft of the arrow, which it could not reach because the shaft had penetrated all the way to the feathering—right into the soft parts. The creature turned on its own axis with lightning speed—far quicker than one would have expected from such a clumsy fellow—and emitted a low, furious howl that betrayed agonizing pain. I am convinced that Katte Hogger's unseemly shot would have been lethal and that the bear would have perished. Sir Gerdung and I attacked it simultaneously from two sides with our spears, and it was an easy victory we carried off at the edge of the northern sea-ice over a heavy cave-bear. I believe we owed that victory in part to Katte Hogger's ungentle shot!

I had never felled a cave-bear before; I had only heard of them, for in school we learned about the animals of the realm of Atlantis and its provinces, among them the cave-bear, which professional hunters and travelers in the Drudenmark had taken. Previously I had only occasionally dealt with the smaller mountain bears of the Andes, which I used to hunt in sport with friends. Today hunting was no longer the idle pastime of Atlantic gentlemen—need forced us. And Katte Hogger was not so entirely in the wrong and did not deserve our ridicule, since in the time that followed we ourselves grew accustomed to tackling large game in decidedly unchivalrous fashion. Later we did not hesitate to trap bears and cave-tigers in pits or in cruel snares unworthy of a true hunter. In the course of years we hunted the gigantic proboscis-bear with its valuable, curved tusk in highly unseemly ways and brought it to death through days of torment—not because we were cruel or had forgotten hunting honor and respect for God's noble creatures, but because hunger and necessity compelled us. What,

among us old Atlanteans, had been considered knowledge and deliberation became for our offspring habit and matter-of-course behavior. Katte defended her master-stroke with great skill. Had she not distracted the bear's attention to that spot—ridiculous as it seemed to us—we might have been badly off. And she refused to see why a predator should be killed from any particular side in order to die "fairly"; to her all sides were equally acceptable. Against such reasoning neither Sir Gerdung nor I could offer anything useful, so it remained that Katte had acted properly. She recovered her arrow undamaged. I recognized with astonishment how this wealthy heiress of a Greenland merchant had already grown into the harsh necessities of our new age. This formerly pampered daughter of a rich man had, within a few years of terrible spiritual and physical hardship, become a hard and shrewdly thinking person. Now she washed hands and arrow in a mountain stream in the valley bottom, carefully examined the condition of the dangerous projectile, and stored it with a satisfied smile in her quiver. Such an arrow was of high value to us, for it took many hours to carve a new one, and even then one did not yet possess a useful head.

We men then loaded ourselves with the slain roe bucks, while Katte struggled along carrying the two haunches of bear meat that Sir Gerdung had cut out with his hunting blade. We left the pelt to the beast, since for now we had no use for it.

As it had snowed heavily since noon, we were able to follow the bear's tracks with ease. These giant predators dwell in caves—hence their name—and I sought out the den of the bear we had slain, for the roofless stone enclosure, in rain and snow, was hardly better than the open air. I wanted to try to find the bear's dwelling and make it our own. Following the clear trail in the snow, we soon found the cave. It was not large, and fortunately it was empty. I breathed easier once I had confirmed that. The entrance was very low, and I could only enter stooping, with my spear extended before me. The kinds of surprises one must prepare for on land are of another sort than those at sea, and to that, too, I now had to accustom myself.

It was already dark when we reached the ruined walls again, and a driving rain mixed with hail was falling. Fortunately, the hearth still smoldered under its sled-roof, for we had covered it thickly with ash. Under the shelter of the sled, Lady Katte prepared our evening meal, which we ate standing, stamping our feet for warmth. It was utterly miserable.

The sleeping bags were still somewhat dry. Before leaving, we had covered them with brush and heaped earth on top. I cannot say that I slept well that night. The leather outer sides of the sleeping tubes kept out the damp well enough, but we men on watch froze, and even when relieved and crawling into our covers, we could not get properly warm.

Katte Hogger slept soundly and deeply, as children sleep. She was filled with the day's adventures, with which she was greatly pleased—and that alone gave her the right to rest. She had shot us two red bucks and gravely wounded a cave-bear from behind; let another girl try to match that feat!

During the night both Sir Gerdung and I had the dubious pleasure of driving off prowling beasts drawn by the scent of blood from the kill. Here in the Drudenmark the struggle for power reigned, and whoever was weaker or less cunning succumbed and had to bow to the strength of another. Fortunately, they were only wolves and foxes that came near our shelter, and they fled at the first firm blow or thrust. Thus our stay in the ruined walls was not especially uplifting—but we were not on a pleasure trip, after all, but on a reconnaissance that had brought us experience and success in a short time.

The next morning we set about moving into the cave of the slain bear. We were able to use the sled, since it had snowed toward dawn, and so we brought all our belongings with us in a single trip. Even the precious fire, Katte Hogger managed to save. She filled her helmet with embers and hot ash and carried a few glowing wood fragments to the cave. Those were anxious moments, as we all stood around the red-glimmering coals, waiting for the first little flame to flare up again! There was plenty of dry brushwood in the cave—it was clear that people had once lived there before us. I cannot say that our new dwelling was very clean, nor that the air within was particularly fresh. The smoke of our fire stung our eyes and weighed on our lungs. We were still too pampered, yet we tried to face the situation with good humor. We had taken the first, and quite decisive, step toward becoming beasts ourselves—by robbing a cave-bear of its den to sit in it ourselves. Still, we were content, for outside the hail was falling and the cold autumn wind whistled through the valley, on whose slope our cave was hollowed into the limestone of the mountain.

We had plenty of dry coal; it lay broken into small pieces far back into the cave. Sir Gerdung gathered more wood from the surroundings and stacked it to dry. The rest of the day we slept, full and comfortable. When the snow ceased in the evening and the wind abated somewhat, we made the heroic decision to wash ourselves in the mountain brook. First, Sir Gerdung and I stood guard while Katte Hogger bathed; afterward she guarded us with her weapon against the possible sudden appearance of wild beasts—which, fortunately, did not come.

We shivered with cold as we returned to the cave. Civilization had triumphed: we went to bed clean in our sleeping-sacks. That night, Katte insisted on taking a watch herself. I was to relieve her afterward, and she woke me by kissing me on the mouth—again and again—while holding shut the straps of my sleeping-bag so that I could not resist. I had no wish to resist, in truth, but endured the assault of the young woman until she was satisfied and freed my arms from their fur-lined bonds. I, for my part, was not yet satisfied, but Katte

suddenly became all business again and slipped with lightning speed into my still-warm sleeping-place, so that I stood outside and could only kiss a small ear.

We kept the slain bear's cave as our dwelling for eight more days, searching the surrounding country for any trace of people—but we found none. Once Katte went hunting alone with Sir Gerdung and returned at evening with a prize that made me laugh: she had captured two young ravens. Gerdung, the serious and quiet knight, had had to help her, for she could not manage them alone. She had clipped the wings of the glossy black fledglings, held one under each arm, and laughed at me. I thought the girl was still quite the child at heart and asked what she meant to do with those black companions. Surely they were better off free, and would likely be very grateful to her if she set them in a tree. But Katte would not be robbed of her joy and replied that the ravens were not meant for me but for my mother. She knew that such creatures, once tamed, could be great amusement—and the long winter lay ahead. Not only would my mother be pleased with the ravens, Katte said, but all the people aboard the Windbirge would be delighted. Sir Gerdung already was, she added. I looked at him and thought that the man was a master at concealing his delight. Besides, Katte continued, there was plenty of space on the galley where the birds could sleep, and she would see to it that they did not trouble my mother but brought her some diversion.

I said that yes, we might as well try it — and that the next year, when our journey began, we could let the birds fly free. Thus the two ravens came with us to the Windbirge, and they accompanied us throughout our entire voyage all the way to Hellas.

Short, violent tremors disturbed our sleep at night, but we paid them no mind, reasoning that the bear must have experienced such quakes many times in its den, and that the arched roof was surely sound. The frequent repetition of the shocks told me that the tidal force of the new moon must still be acting upon the earth's crust and the fiery layers beneath — and that it would continue so for many centuries to come.

One of the following days, Katte shot a red stag with a magnificent crown of antlers. A tusked behemoth we left untouched, and we gave a she-bear a wide berth. What I had sought, however, I found: a large, ice-free river that ran out into the lowlands in a generally eastern direction, its current not too strong. Perhaps I could use it for my journey eastward. I sighed at the thought. We would have to wait until the next spring before we could set out; only in the brief summer of this new Ice Age could we travel, if we were not to perish in cold and damp. Yes — it would be a long time before we reached Hellas.

Where now might the King and my only son — the Acora of the realm — be dwelling? No one knew that the heir to the throne was my son, and even he himself did not know it. Soon I would have other sons, born to me by Katte

Hogger. I smiled as I thought of it. Since Atlantis, six years ago, had sunk beneath the moon-swollen ocean; since nearly all mankind upon the earth had perished and only a few living remnants of former culture wandered across it, time itself had changed at its very root. At times it seemed to me as though I had only dreamed — when I thought back on Atlantis and Aztlan, on the love of my queen, Atlanta Framer. How far, how terribly far, all that lay behind me!

Katte Hogger sat down beside me at the mouth of the cave. She put her arm around my neck and squinted into the sunlight, which, for the first time in a long while, shone warmly again upon us cave-dwellers. Down by the brook, Sir Gerdung of Gaardepoort crouched, scrubbing his sweaty tunic, for he had just skinned and gutted a reindeer to take back to the Windbirge. He had also slain a fine bear and was now taking his time to remove its pelt and pack the meat.

"Katte, will you come live with me now in the captain's cabin?" I asked.

The young woman nodded, as if that were the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm only sad that I'm no longer a maiden," she said after a while. "It's very hard for you, that I—"

I kissed her small, firm hand and noticed how her once beautiful, smooth nails were now chipped and cracked.

"I hardly think of the past anymore," I replied. "Be my wife and beloved, my sister and my daughter, for as long as you wish. I am old — at least compared to you. I accept with deep gratitude what fate has granted me, and for as long as you wish it, I will guard and defend this precious gift. Is that enough for you?"

"You have made me noble again, Godda Apacheta," Katte said in her beautiful deep voice. "For that, I will love you too. It may not be much, but I have never before loved a man. I have taken men because I had to — but also because I wanted to, to have protection and security, which I never found. Only with you am I safe. Now I have become very gentle in your hands, and I would still belong to you even if you sent me away again. But you will not — and I will repay you as best I can. I think I can. I am a woman, and I know…"

"And you're a good-hearted child, too," I laughed.

"Yes, that I am — even more so," Katte Hogger nodded.

Orlin

A winter storm howled around the "Windbirge" when we returned from our ten-day reconnaissance. There was a surprise at once, for on the ice we met a man who allegedly lived on the galley — and the man was a stranger. But it soon became clear what had happened.

While we had been away we had received reinforcements. Although we had searched far and wide through the valleys and hills for people and found none, a few days after our departure from Hogger's galley Atlantean and Drudian refugees had appeared, exhausted, at the "Windbirge," apparently with every right to try to seize the ship. There were six men and eleven women and grown girls with a few adolescent children, neglected and animal-like, starving and partly ill. The wheelwright Saland, who had held the leadership in my absence, had come to the proper decision to take the people in. He had previously spoken with my mother, and when she had seen the strangers the decision was made to accept them. He had the men disarmed and assigned the guests the crew's quarters that were still empty. One woman and two children had meanwhile died of privation, but the others seemed to recover quickly. They received more than enough food and were refitted from the ship's stores. Two men — young Atlantean fellows of about twenty-five years — had fled the northlands of Drudenmark ahead of the ever-southward encroaching ice and, after three years of wandering, had reached the region of the Storm Bay of Drudenmark. There they had joined the others, who were partly Drudian craftsmen and partly peasants. The two Atlanteans were tough as leather, hardened and spare in their needs like predators, but I saw at once that they required ruthless discipline in order to submit obediently to our emergency community. The four others were, as I said, Drudians who had likewise migrated because they would otherwise have starved in the ever-shortening summers. They had brought their wives and children with them, among them seven grown girls and six boys from nine to fifteen years old. One of the girls already had children by one of the Atlantean men. Racially the Drudian people were not particularly bad, but unfortunately they were not Thule people.

What else could I do in this emergency? I saw what later happened: my men took the Drudian girls as wives. Of course they asked me for permission, and I gave it, although I had always been a firm opponent of mixing Nordic blood with other, albeit similar, stock. That was, of course, due to my upbringing, which on this point had been very strict. Personally I had had the good fortune to have received a pure-bred Northland daughter in Katte Hogger, but my journeymen did not have that advantage. I later came to see, however, that the offspring were not corrupted in soul or body, and that the blood-mixing had been just barely tolerable.

I looked over the refugees' weapons and tools. Saland showed them to me with a somewhat contemptuous smile. They were meager stone implements, among them wedge-shaped pieces that were not badly worked, and various implements made from reindeer antler and animal bone.

I looked thoughtfully into my carpenter's old blue eyes. Yes — how soon would we ourselves have to resort to such weapons and tools! Saland had not accompanied the ten-day reconnaissance on the mainland and did not yet suspect how his own fate would one day be.

During the course of the winter the couples paired off, so that in the end, with the exception of Mr. Gerdung of Gaardepoort and the young Lutbrand, my entire little people were married. Because we had piled the sled high with venison and moreover often hunted ashore during the hard winter and also found wild vegetables under the snow, we and our new companions fared well. What these newcomers at first disliked was the work I gave them, but I forced them to do it and had the full support of my old friends from the king's galley. If I had feared that quarrels would break out over the women, I was mistaken. There were no assaults, and I heard nothing of adultery all winter. Mr. Gerdung, as my first deputy aboard the "Windbirge," was ruthlessly severe; he managed many things independently so as not to trouble me, but he also knew how to make the necessity of such discipline clear. I had the impression that he was very popular. In that first winter on the merchant Hogger's ship, Mr. Gerdung laid the foundation for the strict discipline I demanded of him. To his vigor I owe my later successes on the march to Hellas.

A young Drudian girl's attempts to win over Mr. Gerdung were unsuccessful, and I realised that my friend still mourned for Frau Katte. My hope was that during the next summer — which would see our eastward migration — I would win an Atlantean girl for him, and I was resolved to seize one if the opportunity presented itself and if no other means remained.

My Katte used the long winter evenings to inlay my helmet with the finest gemstones she possessed, and when the helmet was finished, she adorned the rim and boss of my shield with precious stones as well. Since by then my new eye was also completed and sat in my head full of brilliance and splendor, as if the eye had never been missing, I was outwardly a splendidly dressed and armed duke. The artificial eye, however, pressed uncomfortably after a while, and so I usually wore it only on feast days or when I went out with Katte. She thought I looked more handsome with the artificial eye, and so I had to accept a bit of discomfort.

"That's quite right, Godda," Katte said when I teased her for her vanity in adorning me. "You are my Northland duke and must look like an Ice Age king — proud, magnificent, exalted, young — and people should feel a little awe when they see you. And handsome, very handsome you must be, like a

singing swan from Thule. Besides, I must always be doing something for you, otherwise I'll suffocate from love, you old warlord!"

"Everything around me has become new," I said. "I hardly recognize myself anymore."

"Don't you know, you wise man from Aztlan, that there is nothing new, that there is only an eternal recurrence of all happenings?" the woman laughed, her teeth gleaming. "That's what I learned in school, as the final knowledge of the essence of the Eternal, as it was called. I still remember my old teacher in Vingat, who taught it to me, but at that time I didn't believe him — at least I didn't understand. How long ago that was! Vingat! Greenland! Even today I can hardly believe that my green homeland at the Pole lies buried under ice and snow. I had indeed learned once that the world-ages change, that in gray antiquity flourishing lands were turned into wastelands by fire and volcanic eruptions, and that inhospitable ice islands became warm, blooming isles — but I thought all that was legend, not truth. Now it has become truth. The change is here! And if we did not stand before a veiled future, I would say we should be glad to witness it."

I replied that at least we would overcome and master this change of hardship — and if we could not complete it ourselves, then our children and grandchildren would continue to build a new Nordic culture, for the individual does not embody eternity, but the future together with the past does.

Katte smiled at me. She said she would see to the future ones herself. If the other women thought the same, then in a few years we would be a strong people.

Now I smiled. A strong people, said Frau Katte! How modest we had become — a mere doubling of our small band we already considered a strong people!

The galley quivered beneath our feet. We were used to this, for it happened every four weeks — the mysterious thrust of the moon's tidal force over land. A true river of ice was pushed up the gentle hills toward the mainland, piled up there, and grew into small mountains. In spring much of it would melt away again, only to be replaced during the long winter. The "Windbirge" had already been pushed many thousands of feet inland during the last cold period and still sat enthroned on a high mound of ice floes, as if drifting through the storm bay of Drudenland. I had accepted the thought that our migration to Hellas would take many, many years, for it had become clear that we could travel only during the two short summer months — the third and last warm month being always consumed by preparations for winter. The long winters would force us, like bears, to dwell in caves and live by hunting. There was no lack of game, as I

had seen and could see again whenever I stalked red deer and reindeer ashore, or faced the wild boar with the spear.

In the life-islands of the Ice Age in southern Drudenland, the animals of the North had gathered in great numbers and filled the forests and valleys far and wide. They had escaped death by cold in greater numbers than men had. The land was almost empty of human inhabitants. Only once, in midwinter, I came upon some frozen Drudian men who had long lain sheltered on a cliff unreachable by beasts, and looked so fresh and unchanged that it seemed they had frozen only that very day. But since they looked emaciated and thin, I concluded that hunger had also contributed to their deaths. Their clothing was inadequate, their weapons entirely insufficient. Apparently they had fled from predators and found safety on the rocky ledge with its steep overhang — only to die there. For only thus could it be understood that their bodies had not been torn by animals. These men had evidently lost their fire and had not known how to rekindle it. Whoever lost fire in the hard time of the northern winter and did not know how to create it anew was doomed to an inescapable death.

And since I knew from my own experience how difficult it was to obtain this heavenly gift, I instructed my capable wheelwright, Saland, to construct a fire-making device that would produce an ember through lightning-quick rotational friction and transfer it onto tinder. Its manufacture was carried out to my full satisfaction, and Saland was as happy as a child—or a great inventor.

Our sleds and wagons stood ready for travel in the hold of the galley. The longboat of the royal ship had been mounted on wheels and was to serve us well in crossing rivers. For longer water journeys that we might undertake together, I planned to build rafts or similar craft as needed.

Thus, life aboard the Windbirge during the long winter was by no means dull, and there was no lack of work. Whatever aboard ship had not yet been examined was now carefully handled and inspected. During this, Katte found her father’s shaving set. It lay in a fine hardwood box together with soap and brush, and gleamed like glowing gold, so new did it seem. Yet it was made of marvelous, highly tempered Atlantean bronze. I was very pleased with this find. Nearly up to my fiftieth year I had been accustomed to shaving daily; but when hardship came—when Atlantis sank and Aztlan had to be abandoned—I lost my own razor somewhere and, from that time on, like the others, I let my beard grow. Now once again I appeared before the women clean-shaven and fragrant with soap, but Katte looked at me doubtfully and laughed. She would not quite say what she was thinking. My mother later betrayed it to me: my wife had noticed the wrinkles that now crossed my face.

"It's too late for regret now, Katte," I said when I learned it. "I'm keeping you, and you must get used to the wrinkled Godda Apacheta. But I'll still keep shaving every day."

She replied that she would feed me better, then the unsightly furrows would go away.

With Katte's consent, I gave one of the razors to my faithful Gerdung of Gaardepoort, and we preserved both relics from the sunken culture with love and care, for they were probably the last of their kind still existing in Drudenmark. We kept the edges razor-sharp and zealously ensured that no one used them for other purposes—such as carving wood, to which their sharpness would easily tempt.

By the end of winter, every last man and woman had been clothed and equipped. Our new additions had grown accustomed to us and become useful; indeed, the men especially had gained great trust in Mr. Gerdung and me, now that they could see the results of the work they had performed throughout the winter.

The Windbirge was quite stripped bare when we left her—never to return. Only the great stores of provisions, especially grain, had to be left aboard. I had a train far too large in proportion to our traveling group, yet I could not take the vast quantities of rye and wheat with me. So we had to learn to do without bread in time. Perhaps the grain might serve others—wandering through the southern regions of Drudenland—who struggled for their lives.

Since we carried fur-lined canvas tents with us, we were not dependent on returning to the bears' cave of the previous summer or occupying other caverns along our way. Our journey went slowly but steadily eastward—slowly, because at first we were forced to pull our sleds and wagons ourselves. Our two Atlanteans from northern Drudenmark proved very capable in this; they had rich experience from wandering through snow and frost and rejoiced at every bit of recognition shown to them.

The journey led, in fact, between two glacial regions: the one, principal and greater, pressing down from the north; and a second, no less severe, lying upon the mountains and in their valleys, blocking even the river system between the Iberian northern range and the Alps. I could easily have pushed through here to the sea of Mitteland, but the ice masses and the unbearable cold warned me away, so that after a brief reconnaissance of that route I resolved finally to fix our course upon the eastward migration.

If I had had at my disposal the means that some years later would be available to me, I would already have tried to force a breakthrough to the Mitteland Sea west of the Maritime Alps. Today I dared not attempt it.

One day the two young Atlanteans came to our camp with two captured reindeer that had obviously once belonged to a domesticated herd. They very quickly became accustomed to running beside our wagons with ropes around them and finally to serving as draft animals.

My old mother was the only one who rode in a wagon drawn by a reindeer. She sat like a queen on silk cushions and wore one of the precious fur coats that the merchant Hogger had brought aboard the galley before his departure from Vingat. Her head was also protected by a fur cap set with a few green gems, and one could see that I had married one of Greenland's richest heiresses. On the rear sled-board, however, the two ravens sat with their glossy black eyes; they were now perfectly tame and would not leave my mother's side. They gave no thought to flying away, although their feathers had long since regrown. The animals had grown used to us, and Katte Hogger had once again had her way.

My wife was clad from head to toe in finely tanned feathers like we men, and with her ivory shooting gear she looked like a goddess of the hunt.

Spring was cool and rainy, but the summer that followed soon repaid us with much sun and therefore warm days. The nights remained cool as before. We were traveling right along the borders of the northern and southern ice, and we rejoiced in the native birds that used the short summer to nest and breed here. In a sheltered valley basin we found, after twenty-six days of travel, for the first time a thriving farm. There sat two Drudian peasants with their wives and many children, and a few Atlantean laborers — one of whom later fell in with us and traveled with us, since he no longer wished to serve among the Drudians but preferred to serve under me.

The meeting began very hostilely. The two young Atlanteans who had come to us on the Windbirge, acting as the usual vanguard, came upon a man plowing and cultivated fields. The peasant had his horse and plow halted, grabbed a spear that lay ready, and threw it at the young men without hitting them. Then the man fled, and my Atlanteans let him go, since they were instructed to avoid fights with strangers whenever possible and only had the duty to report to me as quickly as possible what had happened. They returned to the main group, radiant, leading the captured mount by the bridle, and reported the incident. I was very pleased with the lads and took the horse into custody for the time being — with the intention, however, of never giving it up. That horse formed the nucleus of a cavalry unit I would later raise.

The Drudian farmers in turn sent out a scout, who, however, fell into our hands. I sent the man with a message to the Drudian homestead, assuring them that I had no intention of attacking. But they did not trust me and prepared for battle. As we were superior in number, in war experience, in skill with arms,

and in weaponry, we saw no need to avoid a decisive encounter; yet when our laughably small war bands faced one another, the inherited cheerfulness of the ancient universal friend — the spirit of comradeship — prevailed in me, and I stepped a few paces in front of the line and began to speak. The result was that we did not have to measure our swords against the peasants' stone battle-axes; besides, I realized how right Katte Hogger had been in adorning me like a king with jewels. The poor countryfolk took me for a mighty duke and probably believed there were still main forces behind us that we unfortunately did not have. They therefore decided to come to terms with us.

Naturally, no friendship came of it — I could not expect that at the edge of the northern ice — and the Drudians breathed a sigh of relief when we did not enter their farmstead but instead pitched our tents outside, sheltered by a hay barn. I of course kept the horse, giving the peasants in return several untanned bearskins we had taken during the winter hunt — hides that would soon spoil and already smelled rather unpleasant. To the Drudians, however, they were most welcome, since with their pitiful weapons they could neither fight nor bring down a bear and were in great need of furs. They said their wives would tan the hides nicely and put them to use.

As there were no Atlantean women on the farm, I refrained from engaging in any abduction of women, though I confess I often did so later, and would have done so now had it been necessary. Atlantean girls had become rare. All the more vital it was for my small folk to obtain such women — and it is scarcely necessary to explain the reasons.

The few northern men serving on the Drudian farm seemed content enough and, after their long hardship, had no desire to join us, except for the one young man I have already mentioned, who later followed after us.

Herr Gerdung bartered with one of the peasant women for a bundle of handwoven linen strips, and I expressed my appreciation to my loyal companion that the Atlantean knight had developed into a merchant of cloth — though he knew well how grateful I truly was, for our supply of undergarments was in a pitiful state. From that time on, I rode as the duke of my little people high on horseback — without a saddle for the moment, since even the farmer himself had none. He owned, however, three more horses, four cows, and a small herd of reindeer, all domesticated.

We journeyed on unweariedly — our pale skin now tanned brown and tough, hardened by rain and wind. Katte Hogger often sat before me on the horse and chattered cheerfully, speaking of plans and intentions for the winter and the coming year, of her hope that my first child would be a son, and of her pride in being the wife of so mighty a duke. I listened gladly, for I loved her voice and her childlike nature, which did me good. Katte harbored not the slightest doubt that in a few years I would find the way to Hellas, and that then,

in the sunny south under the king's protection, we would at last rest from our long travail at the edge of Thule's ice.

That our trek advanced at a snail's pace did not trouble her, nor did it become faster when we captured more reindeer to use as additional draft animals. The smallest sleds we even harnessed to dogs that roamed half-wild around deserted farmsteads and could be captured only after fierce resistance. On the northern slopes of the hills and mountains we nearly always found snow, which never entirely melted even in summer, so we were not forced to abandon the sleds. Yet I resolved to fit them with wheels for the next traveling season — solid disc wheels cut from round tree trunks — since Saland no longer had sufficient or suitable tools to build spoked ones.

The draft animals, our dogs, soon became tame again and pulled the sleds with eager barking, so that the woods and valleys often rang with their bright clamor, as if a great hunt for wild beasts were underway. My dog teams soon became famous along the edge of the ice, and I later met many wandering clans who showed a superstitious dread of this very contrivance.

With the achievements of our ten-thousand-year-old culture — and especially with its tools — things declined rapidly, as I already realized in that first summer of wandering. Yet I cannot say it filled us with any particular sorrow. We hardly noticed it. Habit and the compulsion of daily need, the constant readiness for combat, the necessity of raiding and fighting wild beasts — these so filled our lives that we scarcely gave a thought to Atlantis or to the past. And when we did speak of how things once were, we smiled — as though life had been child's play back then, compared to now, when danger lurked behind every ridge.

We suffered no want that summer. The hunt provided us with plenty of meat; only, as already on the king's galley and on the Windbirge, fresh vegetables were lacking. Knowing the possible harm from that deficiency, I had the women gather wild greens. Bread was very rare and a luxury. We had been spoiled with bread aboard the Windbirge, with its rich cargoes of wheat and rye, and had to adapt completely.

A second time on that summer's march we came upon a farm that had clearly been inhabited, although the people had fled and taken their livestock and goods with them. We tracked them down in the woods with our dogs and took from them three Atlantean children — two girls of fourteen and fifteen and a boy of eight — because the Drudian farmers kept the young people like slaves. I would have seized them even if they had been well treated, for I had to gather the remnants of Nordic blood and bring them to the king. The children, however, came willingly and gladly. I also compelled the surrender of two more horses. The farmer took his revenge by throwing a spear from hiding at my rear guard, wounding Forsanti in the shoulder. That was not wise of the farmer, though I

understood and respected his mood. We turned back and led away three more horses and several tamed reindeer as compensation for the wound to my comrade Forsanti. He had to be carried for a long time until my mother's skill had nursed him sufficiently to march again.

My companions in the field were not wholly satisfied with me. They would gladly have burned the treacherous fellow's farm, for Forsanti was much beloved and one of the best and most reliable Atlanteans in my band; but I ordered them to refrain, and so it was done. The star-wise man of Aztlan still lay within me, and the marauding duke was yet too new to destroy senselessly what might be preserved.

To spare the wounded Forsanti, I made camp for the winter earlier than usual. I chose the shore of a lake rich in fish, where perhaps we could continue fishing through ice holes even in the hardest winter. The lake looked very strange. When we arrived, its surface lay very low, yet I could see from the shorelines that it could rise much higher—much higher indeed. The lake was fed by a river flowing from the north, and a smaller outlet led from it eastward.

Here, for the first time in my life, I encountered a lake and river that regularly filled and emptied in periodic intervals—while the river that fed it flowed, at one time, from north to south, and then, after fourteen days, from south to north. Since the slope of the land clearly did not change, despite the frequent earthquakes occurring in that region, it soon became clear to me that here too the tidal force of the moon altered the balance conditions on Earth in regular intervals—so that when the moon was near the Earth, the river's current flowed southward and filled the lake to its brim; but when the moon was far from the Earth, the water drained mostly northward from the lake.

Thus, under the influence of the new companion of the Earth, there were rivers that alternately flowed back and forth, as if the slope itself were reversed. In truth, it was nothing else than a reversal of slope, for the gravitational pull of the moon changed the balance of weight on Earth according to whether the satellite was near or distant. I had already observed a similar phenomenon at sea on a larger scale: there, the moon's tidal force drove the earthly flood-wave, together with the ice floes it carried, from north to south—and pushed them back again when the moon moved along its farthest orbital path from the Earth.

I already knew how the ice drifted over land, with its frontal ridges and ground debris—only that these ice streams did not flow back northward, presumably because the friction on the ground was too strong to let the ice masses glide back without an actual tidal pull. But when the tide acted southward, that is, when the satellite was near the Earth, the ice stream pushed jerkily southward.

It was unfortunate that I could not record my observations and findings in detail. I did so only in brief notes—for the same reason that had led me to keep my ship's log in such short form. I no longer possessed any writing leather. My notes, under present circumstances, held value only for myself—or so I thought. That my ship's log would one day fall into the hands of a priestly scholar from the Nile-land, who would spin from my notes a "History of the Fall of Atlantis," full of the most ridiculous errors amidst fragments of truth, I did not yet know.

The natural phenomenon of the lake and river, with their alternating gradients, clearly showed me how profoundly the new gravitational conditions on Earth had taken hold. After a march of twenty-six days and more, I was still unable to determine our position in Drudenland. All river systems must have been completely transformed. This was evident from the fact that I frequently had to cross valleys that bore all the marks of former rivers, though no water now flowed there—though it was clear they must have only recently dried up. Moreover, the ice damming between the high mountain ranges in the south of Drudenmark had caused the formation of vast lakes, which I had to circle widely to the north. Yet I found that the ice-free belt extended farther north than I had expected. Out at sea the ice had reached far more to the south—but that was no doubt due solely to the drifting of the ice upon the mobile tidal waves.

Near the lake with the changing water level there was no natural cave the size of a bear's or cave-tiger's den to be found, so I had a tunnel driven into a hill, covered it with tree trunks and then with earth. A hearth was built in this chamber of fieldstones and provided with a smoke-flue through the roof. The entrance was kept narrow and low to keep out the expected bitter winter cold, and the closure was made from several pelts that served as a door. A second covered tunnel, connected to the first, served as a stall for the captured horses and the tame reindeer. Our first care was to bring in hay as winter fodder. Cutting the grass was done in a very poor way with swords and laboriously forged sickles; even a serviceable scythe was made by Saland, which I personally wielded as duke so that I would not have to stoop constantly. My example was still necessary at first; besides, time pressed and there were few workers. But since my entire small people, including the half-grown children, took part in harvesting, we managed to bring in the necessary winter fodder for our animals before the frost set in.

For the time being we lived in our fur-lined tents because they were airy and easy to keep clean; later, however, the biting cold forced us into the tunnel cave and held us captive there through the long winter months. We stacked our supply of firewood close to the tunnel entrances. All this work required more time than one can imagine, and that time came off the actual traveling season eastward and northeastward. There was no other way to act if I wanted to bring my emergency band of Atlantean folk healthy and fit to Hellas.

During a violent earthquake, which was followed a few times by lesser shocks, a hot spring opened near the lake. We were subsequently very grateful for this spring, for it allowed us throughout the winter to keep ourselves clean and also always to have open water in the lake. The inflow from that spring into the lake never froze solid, and fish readily gathered there and were easy to catch without our having to hack holes through the ice.

As in the previous year from the Windbirge I sent out scouting parties far and wide — mounted young men and sleds harnessed with dogs for the small train, which I sometimes led myself. Katte also often took part in such journeys until, because of the child she expected, she had to stay at home. In the border time between departing summer and the coming winter our camp became a nursery, for almost all of our women and girls gave the little community new citizens, and from every tent one heard the shrill voices of the new generation.

In the late summer of that first year of wandering I made another acquisition that culturally enriched our rather fallen circle by adding several noble members of the former imperial administration in Drudenmark. I found the chamberlain (mark-scribe) of the imperial governor of Drudenmark, the High Knight Gurtur Ase Sasborg, a scion of one of the oldest families of the realm, as the addition “Ase” attests. I knew the family of this gentleman, though not he himself.

At the outbreak of the catastrophe that struck the earth and destroyed the realm, he had been traveling from Etruria over the Alps and had, fortunately, already reached the lowlands north of that mountain chain when the tremendous earthquakes began. He traveled with an entourage of more than thirty Atlantean gentlemen — administrators and surveyors, agricultural experts and mining specialists, master builders of high construction and roadworks — yet because of the immediately ensuing devastating cold and the very soon after onset of northern ice he was unable to reach his superior, the imperial governor of Drudenmark. He had thrown himself and his men into the bailiwick of Orlin, which lay on an imperial road to the north. This bailiwick, like all the imperial strongholds of the land, was built partly of stone but for the greater part of oak timber, and was very strong. Herr Sasborg had for almost six years been waging a small war against all who wished to seize that tempting fortress. When on a far advanced reconnaissance I discovered the castle, I too felt a strong desire to take possession of it, but the works on my habitation tunnels for man and beast were already so far advanced that I preferred not to move before winter. Nevertheless I had to know at all costs how strong the fortress’s garrison was and what we might have to expect from it.

The gatekeeper shouted from behind his hatch that I had better move along at once, or else—followed by the usual threats of a man accustomed to seeing every stranger as an enemy. I naturally had full understanding for such an unfriendly attitude and made my horse step back on its haunches so that I

remained under cover of my jewel-inlaid shield. No shots were fired at me, but I saw some movement behind the battlements, showing that the garrison was on alert. Before I got out of calling range, however, a figure appeared on the wooden parapet and waved for me to return. I did so, with due caution, and when we could hear each other, I halted and called out that I was Godda Apacheta, the Star-Wise of Aztlan, from the Mark of Tiahusinju Highland, traveling toward Hellas.

Then the man introduced himself, in a voice that sounded openly pleased. He asked whether I was related to the Apacheta who had held the Mark of Simbabuie, and said he knew my name, for his brother-in-law had been the head of an imperial observatory in Scotenland—and that man had known me. He himself, he said, was Gurtur Ase Sasborg of Schoongard in the Realm of Atlantis, the secretary of the imperial governor of the Mark.

That the gentleman spoke so kindly to me had another, obvious reason, and I had Katte to thank for it. The sun stood in the east—it was still early morning when this conversation took place—and the gemstones, inheritance of the wealthy merchant Hogger, shone from my helmet and shield in a thousand colors. I thus made a fine impression on the castellan, as he later told me himself. Until now only ragged, starving hordes had appeared before the fortress, and now came a man clad in the full splendor of a vanished age, riding up on horseback—though the horse itself was neither fine nor well-kept.

The mark-scribe invited me to be his guest in the bailiwick and to bring my companions with me. My companions were Katte and Lutbrand, the young ship's boy from the king's galley.

I replied that these were not times for blind trust, but I would come if he sent out one man or woman as a hostage. That person would remain under the guard of my two companions until my discussion with Lord Sasborg was concluded. The mark-scribe readily agreed and even sent out a young girl—a fair, lovely Atlantean—and called down from the parapet that she was his own daughter. I took the young girl's hand and smiled a little, for she was rightly frightened. When she saw that Katte Hogger was a woman no less fair and gracious than herself, and that Lutbrand regarded her with the reverence of one beholding a wonder from a better world, she took heart.

I then entered through the quickly opened oak gate into the bailiwick. Inside, things did not look as splendid as one might have expected from outside, for after all it was an imperial fortress. The time of distress had left its marks here as well. Frequent earthquakes had even damaged the sturdy timberwork and shaken and worn the foundations. Here and there I could see that the garrison had made timid attempts to repair the worst damage. Yet their way of life seemed poorer even than ours. Sickness and strife had constantly thinned their

number of learned, un-martial men, and the mark-scribe had only fourteen men left in the fortress, six women, and a number of children of all ages.

This remnant of a once-notable company of high imperial officials and scholars lived in Orlin in a mood of decline. The imperial road on which the bailiwick stood was, of course, still used by wandering bands and hordes, so that the troubles of war were endless. Time and again in the past years the Atlanteans had been robbed of much of their hard-won harvests, their herds of reindeer driven off, and members of the garrison murdered before the castle walls.

Gurtur Ase Sasborg was a man of barely forty years, but he looked long past fifty. He was thin and narrow, his frame stooped, and several of his gentlemen looked the same. Hunger and privation had sorely marked these unwar-like men, and if, over the years, they had become sharp-edged and suspicious like beasts of prey, they resembled cunning foxes far more than they did stout-hearted wolves.

The master of the house already knew that I had set up my winter camp two days' journey southwest of his bailiwick. I asked him why, knowing of our arrival, he had not visited us. He grew embarrassed and fell silent, but his wife — a tall woman with careworn features — answered in his stead that the men had considered the venture too risky. Their weapons, she said, were poor and consisted mostly of stone, while the scouts — Drudian peasants from the surrounding area — had reported that my people were uniformly and excellently armed, with a discipline that indicated a stern and uncompromising leadership. Furthermore, we were largely mounted, and therefore greatly superior. They had also seen that in my camp work went on from early morning until late evening, almost without rest; that one of our heroes had slain a cave bear near Orlin with his spear as if it were a hare — in short, they had judged it wisest to remain quietly behind the strong wooden palisades of the bailiwick and hope that I and my people would one day move on without troubling them.

I replied that I had no intention of harassing my Atlantean blood brothers, but I expressed the wish to meet the other gentlemen, especially the surveyors, for I expected from them a correction of my maps. Of the surveyors, however, only one remained alive; yet he made a capable impression and seemed a man of strong will. His name was Lokke Paliso, and he came from Norrland. I invited him to be my guest at my lake with the hot spring, and I also invited the other gentlemen to come. Unfortunately, they had become somewhat timid behind their secure palisades and were reluctant to go abroad. Some of the younger men among them, who had belonged to the original garrison of the bailiwick, worked for the learned lords — hunting for them, seeing to their general safety — and only in rare emergencies had the pen-pushers themselves had to take up arms.

What they truly lacked was firm leadership. There was no reason why hunger should be a guest in that strong fortress; it was not the ice-age cold alone that had reduced the linen and clothing of these Atlanteans to such hopeless rags, nor that had forced them even to stint on water for washing. If I were to place Herr Gerdung of Gaardepoort there with two or three of my disciplined Northland lads, something would indeed have to go awry if those learned gentlemen were not turned into capable men by the end of the winter.

Yes — Ritter Gerdung must go there!

I confess I was a little calculating in my thoughts. I had seen the mark-scribe's daughter, Ragild, only briefly outside the gate. But what I had seen was enough. By posting Herr Gerdung to the bailiwick, I was at the same time placing him near that beautiful, slender girl. Perhaps my friend would then forget the hopeless matter of Katte Hogger and let his heart be captured by this lovely child of men. I declare solemnly here that I had never in my life busied myself with matchmaking, nor did I possess the slightest inclination or natural gift for it. Yet as leader and duke of a people that had to increase if it was to survive, I was compelled not only to arrange marriages but also to procure women for my men — whether by peaceful means or by open abduction. Only thus can it be understood that I had to look to Herr Gerdung's welfare as well, for it would have been regrettable if that man, whose worth I well knew, were to remain without descendants.

It was hardly a band of heroes that I found in the fortress of Orlin, and it was a disgrace that a castle-protected force of thirty Atlantean men had, over the years, dwindled to fourteen — apart from those lost to illness. I knew Herr Gerdung: he was tactful, yet strong in will. He would not blunder in like an angry bear, but would raise his demands day by day. The people would then receive sufficient nourishment — through hunting and fishing, gathering beech nuts as vegetables, and digging roots as additional fare. These folk owned barely ten chickens, though they kept them in a warm coop! But if one was too lazy to fetch grass seeds and the degenerate rye grains from the abandoned fields and thresh them, one could hardly expect to keep more fowl.

I proposed to Herr Sasborg that I would help him if, in turn, he were willing to march with me to Hellas next summer under my leadership. His family and unmarried men could of course come along. But my command would have to begin in winter, for I could not take him and his people in their present condition on the road.

The mark-scribe was not greatly inclined to accept my proposal. The summers had grown too short, and the winters, which had formerly been unknown in Drudenmark, were terribly severe. To set out now, he said, would mean the beginning of the end, especially for so distant a goal as I had named. What had passed the bailiwick in recent times presented a miserable and

degenerate appearance. Often it had been nothing but depraved bands of robbers eking out a living by murder and theft. We would fare no better if we simply abandoned so strong a fortress as Orlin. What on earth did I want in Hellas? I should be thankful if I kept my life.

I thought I could cure such despondent views in that fallen man, and I answered that I intended to go to the king Balder of Atlantis.

At that name not only did he brighten, but all the gentlemen who had gathered suddenly came to life, and the dull, hopeless eyes began to sparkle.

King of Atlantis!

It was the sound of glorious years past, a siren call to a time when the scholar could work and research in peace under the protection of the mighty realm without ever having to take up the sword himself. The submerged culture shone again in the eyes of those poor noble folk, and even the mark-scribe's wife dared a friendly smile.

They asked from all sides where the king might be. Had it not been told at the great catastrophe of the earth that the king and his realm had gone down in the floods of the Atlantic? I then told them of Aztlan and of Acora Balder, who was now king of the realm and who awaited me at the Triangle Isle in the southern Tyrrhenian Sea, where the great, shoe-shaped Etruscan promontory ends. As I know the king, I said, he will at least have placed a tower with a watch there, even if he himself has sailed perhaps to the Nile-land. In any case, loyalty and friendship compelled me to win the Middle Sea for Hellas. There it would surely be possible to obtain a galley and sail to the Triangle Isle. I have seafaring men with me, used to voyaging the Atlantic, and so they could easily handle any galley that was at home in the Middle Sea. That I intended to take the land route via Hellas is explained by the fact that the sea-alps and their eastern formations were so heavily iced that crossing their passes with my meagre means was impossible, especially since I had women and small children with me who had to be spared. Herr Gurtur Ase Sasborg would now understand me better than before. I had given my king a promise and must fulfil it or perish. In this company it would be taken for granted when I said this. Honour and loyalty are a self-chosen compulsion that nevertheless means the highest freedom, because it comes from God's conscious soul and not under the threat of swords or even whips. I therefore hold that all Atlanteans who know of the king or have learned where he is should at once set out to him. The ruler needs every sword arm, but above all every mind and skill of the sunken culture to make it possible to build anew a civilisation superior to all other human groups. To gather the ruins of the realm on my march—that is why I am here in Orlin. My Atlantean band may be scarcely larger than that of the bailiwick, but it is a compact core of trained fencers and relentless daring men. They were not always such; these capabilities can be learned, and I have ensured that they are

learned. I can already vouch for success. I do not demand that the gentlemen become finished warriors overnight. I know perfectly well that, as officials of the realm and as scholars, they were only briefly and incompletely trained for war; but I also know that I would bring the king and the small people the greatest benefit if I could supply him with experts in administration, agriculture, construction, surveying, and mining. It is simply the duty of the men of Orlin to join my group now that they know the king in a manner expects them. This is not a question of being glad merely to keep one's life, but of higher things. I need hardly remind them of their oath of service. No earthquake and no icing absolves one from the kingly obligation. The earth had once belonged to the northern people. Now they are shattered and scattered and wander at Thule's ice-edge like the singing-swans of their homeland — yet the lance of the soul still aims at the peaks and heights. In the deepest need they are resolved to imprint once again upon the ruined earth the round stamp of their soul. Therefore I am convinced that precisely they, who are the best of the people in education and noble blood, will heed my call.

I could well observe how my words affected those men marked by the sense of doom. No one had spoken to them like that for years. They were as if stunned, so deeply had I shaken their souls. And the scion of the oldest Atlantean nobility, Herr Gurtur Ase Sasborg, swallowed and gasped for air—seemingly from inner agitation, and perhaps also from shame. It was instructive to see how their bearing changed within just a few heartbeats. Forgotten lessons of youth in the imperial army awoke: heads were lifted high again, necks visibly stiffened. The indomitable pride had reawakened in these men—pride in belonging to the Nordic people of Thule, whom, as we believe, the ancient Friend in the heavens has favored with His special love.

After a brief silence, Gurtur Sasborg replied that he would first consult with his council of lords. I laughed—not as loudly and sharply as I might have liked, but enough that several of the listening gentlemen joined in with me. In such a situation, I said, he needed only to ask briefly whether any of his companions had anything important to add. If not, then he was the leader, and it was for him to decide. I assumed, of course, that this had always been the way among Atlantean men?

No—it clearly had not been so here. I knew that well enough. But now, all at once, Herr Sasborg could give orders—and he gave the order I had expected, meeting no objection. The garrison of Orlin would join me at the beginning of next summer to travel to Hellas and to the King. The few Drudians of the bailiwick would be free to decide whether they wished to come along or not.

I had a short while afterward to speak with the surveying expert, Herr Fokke Paliso of Norrland, the northernmost part of Teutenland. He showed me his maps, and I was as delighted as a child—for at last I knew precisely where,

in the southern Drudenmark, I was located. I could also roughly retrace where the Windbirge had been driven ashore and the route of our march during the past summer. Herr Paliso agreed with me that the river courses throughout the entire Mark had been completely altered, and that the maps could no longer claim any accuracy. He showed me his stores of writing leather and Nile papyrus, which I envied greatly. He gave me a small bundle, which I accepted as though it were a precious treasure. The surveyor told me that he had taken this supply from the scribe's own writing chamber, since his superior had made "rather excessive" use of the precious material. I assumed then that Herr Gurtur Sasborg was also a scholar who kept written records—but I later learned what Paliso had truly meant by that remark about "misuse."

Herr Sasborg then presented me to the remaining women and girls of the bailiwick and called the children, who had been waiting just outside the door, to come in. The little ones were speechless, staring at the jewel-adorned Godda Apacheta as though at a war-god. Herr Sasborg next asked whether I wished to take a tour of the fortress's chambers. He said it as though I were already the commander and lord of Orlin, with every right to inspect it. I was pleased by this swift and silent acknowledgment of my authority, and I sensed that the castellan was glad, under the present circumstances, to yield the burden of responsibility for the bailiwick, its men, and its women into my hands. Even in the time of hardship, he had remained an official of the Realm—a man whose home was at the blue-clothed council table, not at the shield's edge or upon the sharpness of his sword.

The master of the house led me through the fortress. Above all, I wished—according to my position—to see the most essential goods: the weapons and tools that still remained. Unfortunately, there was not much of real use left, though there was still enough that my old Saland could make something of it. At least the swords of the Atlantean gentlemen were of hardened bronze, smooth and excellently forged, though a little delicate, since they had served the imperial officials more as ornaments than as weapons. There was little in the way of missile weapons—which was perhaps fortunate. The fortress, before being occupied by the Orlin officials, had already been in foreign hands, and the valuable armory of the bailiwick had been plundered. Thus I found only simple, weakly effective yew bows of their own make, and I thought that I had hardly needed to be as cautious as I was that morning before the fortress gate. The little hunting bow of my Katte alone had three times the range of these pitiful weapons!

On the other hand, the mark-scribe's writing room was fully intact and in good order. That moved me, as a former imperial official, to a certain tenderness—but I could not suppress a laugh when I saw it. There were whole stacks of ancient tax ledgers, community records on school buildings, teacher appointments, mayoral matters, building plans and cost estimates, secret maps for conscription, for intelligence networks, for bridge and road construction

throughout the empire, and a thousand other things. Unfortunately, the leathers and Nile-papyri were all written on, and thus useless to me; but I secretly decided to scrape some of those valuable manuscripts clean and reuse them for my own notes. In Drudenland no man paid taxes anymore, and thousands of communities lay buried under ice and snow. Those that remained in the ice-free southern Mark had mostly been plundered or burned by roving bands, and only a tiny fraction survived.

I knew, of course, that my decision to erase and destroy such precious records—permits for taverns issued by district authorities, or authorizations for new bulls in rural associations—was a punishable offense, and that the destruction of imperial documents was at least worthy of imprisonment. But I had fallen so low that the voice of official conscience no longer reached me. I sometimes thought with regret of my own beautiful star charts and celestial plans, of the calculation sheets for the movements of the wandering planets and the shifts in brightness of variable suns. So I could understand, to a degree, why Herr Sasborg's heart clung to this heap of papers. Nevertheless, I was firmly resolved not to bring that useless mass to the King. I would have had to multiply the number of my dog sleds tenfold!

Cautiously I asked Herr Sasborg what he intended to do with all those documents. He replied that he had no particular use for them, but they were valuable and contained the records and proceedings of a part of the Mark. During the long winters, he said, he often occupied himself by reading through them and determining their subjects. He had even taken to reviewing them independently, and he found satisfaction in comparing his own "decisions" with those of his former predecessors in office. He admitted that at times he reached different conclusions, though often they coincided.

I nearly choked but controlled myself, and said that if he wished to continue that work during the coming winter for diversion, he might kindly submit his "decisions" to me for countersignature.

In between, Herr Sasborg kept asking about the royal family. Many of his noble relatives had served in the king's household, and he himself had once hoped to be transferred to the court in Atlantis. That had been prevented by the terrible disaster of the moon's entrapment by the Earth. He asked whether the sovereign was married, and to whom. I told him that Queen Atlanta Framer, daughter of the imperial count of Akapana, had died, and that His Majesty had not remarried. But he had a son, the young Godda Acora, now six years old.

I said it with studied indifference, but my heart stirred sharply as I spoke of my own son—whom my queen Atlanta had borne me. I was resolved to keep my secret forever, as I had promised my royal friend. The Acora Godda was regarded as the king's son, and so it should remain. I fell silent and smiled faintly to myself, lost in the bright flare of memories from bygone times. What

would my Godda Acora say if he saw again the poor one-eyed helmsman to whom his small heart had once clung so lovingly? Yes—the one-eyed steersman now had two eyes once more, though one of them was the gift of Katte Hogger, composed of precious gemstones, so cunningly made that one could scarcely see how stiff and lifeless it lay in the socket beneath the brow bone.

Would the boy recognize me again when, after many years, I came to him? Would I have to remove the jewel from the eye socket so that his memory of the one-eyed man might return? And how tall would the heir to the throne have grown by then? A young hero would stand before me, with clear blue eyes and a proud white breast—a jewel of Atlanta's noble blood, a knight of the sword with a proud, deliberate soul that responds slowly to passions, yet acts swiftly and decisively once resolved! Or perhaps a contemplative, scholarly mind filled with a thousand stars and even more suns? Who could know how Atlanta's son would emerge from the age of ruin?

"Follow me to the stables, Herr Apacheta," said Sasborg.

I started in surprise—I had drifted far away in thought and had scarcely listened to the master's final explanations.

Six horses stood in the stable, along with two scrawny foals. During the previous winter, eight horses had perished, the mark-scribe told me. I did not answer, for I could not imagine how such heavy losses had come about. Perhaps they had lacked fodder. If the master spent his time reworking official records of centuries past, it was likely he had not taken the trouble to cut hay in time for his animals. When the leader does not drive his men to action, little can be expected from those who follow.

In the adjoining stall grumbled eight cows—that was something! Our women and children subsisted on reindeer milk; perhaps I could take these valuable milk beasts along as well. My small people traveled slowly enough that the sluggish cows could probably keep up without harm. How I would provide winter stalls for them would be revealed by time—but I would have more hands for labor by then. And after all, I meant to grow.

I was not displeased with what I had seen and took my leave of the small community in Orlin. I promised that within a few days I would send Ritter Gerdung von Gaardepoort, who would spend the coming winter preparing for the great journey to Hellas. I asked Herr Sasborg to receive my friend kindly and assist him. He would soon recognize that I had sent him no unworthy man, and they would surely become friends before long. In any case, I would still be near enough to mediate any disagreements, even though I lived two days' travel from the bailiwick. I would have tall waymarks set up with red banners that even snow could not cover, so that the road from Orlin to the lake and back could be found at any hour, even by night.

Katte and Lutbrand still stood not far from the gate, speaking warmly with the castellan's daughter, the young Ragild Sasborg. The time had grown long for them all. Katte had been uneasy, for I had stayed so long within the fortress, but her keen eyes had seen me touring the storage rooms with the household and she had calmed. Ragild Sasborg had assured her that her father harbored no treachery—otherwise, he would not have sent his own daughter as hostage before the gate. Besides, he had been overjoyed finally to meet a noble Atlantean instead of the ragged, suspicious wanderers who usually passed. I smiled at Katte, and she understood me—the jewels of the Hogger had not failed in their effect.

We said farewell to Ragild Sasborg and dismissed her with kind words. Katte gave her a golden ring to seal their friendship. I watched the young girl go and took pleasure in her light, graceful step.

"She pleases me," I said softly to Katte. My wife looked at me questioningly. I laughed and spoke only one name: "Gerdung."

Then she laughed too and asked me to lift her before me onto the horse. We waved back toward the fortress and rode homeward at a slow pace. Lutbrand led the horse by the reins; I held Katte Hogger in my arms, my hand resting lightly on the bridle.

I was well satisfied with this day. I had won a band of Atlanteans who, though at first glance of little use, could with patience and firm discipline become a valuable part of my wandering people. Fourteen Atlantean men made a force of real weight if properly led, and the women and children of the fortress, with care, would be a welcome addition to our migration.

The earth jolted beneath our feet. The horse stopped and snorted in fear. Katte stroked its neck. Yes—we rode and marched across uncertain ground, and beasts grow even less accustomed to earthquakes than men. Yet today I felt that it was a joy to live, when one must secure life anew each day. I had once been an old, somewhat one-sided scholar, and now necessity had made me a master of dangers, responsible for the being and survival of a small people! With the close of this summer, my shipwrecked band had grown into a force that could show itself along the ice-edge of the northern marches. And with that strength grew my confidence and my faith in my own power.

Lokke Paliso, the surveyor to the imperial governor of Drudenmark, had lent me a valuable map by which I could correct my own. I was very pleased with this man—for he was an expert on the northern lands and their soil, and had in earlier years surveyed in Teutenland under imperial commission. At forty-five, he possessed wide experience and was considered highly competent, else he would never have been appointed to the governor's immediate service.

He too had observed the strange behavior of the many ice-streams pressing southward from the north into Drudenland, and knew the terminal ridges of rubble, stone, gravel, and mud rolling before them. He had even determined the periodic rhythms in which the advance alternated.

My theory—that the Earth's new companion was the cause of these movements—brought only a smile and a shake of the head when I mentioned it briefly. Well, he was not a star-wise man by trade as I was, and he had not experienced at close range the dreadful consequences of the moon's capture by the Earth, as I had. So I could not expect him to agree at once when I stated my belief. It was even a good sign that he did not—that he wished to think and reason for himself.

That the agricultural experts in Orlin had been unable to cultivate the abandoned and neglected fields around the fortress was a troubling sign of their lack of vigor. It has always been one thing to take the plow into one's own hands—and quite another merely to speak learnedly about it.

I shook my head and laughed quietly to myself, as people often do when they are growing old. Katte wanted to know why I was murmuring under my breath.

"You see, Katte," I replied, "I grumble because I've made the strangest acquisitions these last few years. First, I found you—took you as my daughter and married you at the same time—and you still run a whole generation ahead of me! Now I've gained a most curious company besides, one that trails a generation behind me! And I must get along with both—with you and with them. And both get along just fine. Can one help but laugh at that?"

My wife thought that things went quite well enough between us, and besides, she said, she did not think as much about the future or the difference in our ages as I did. True, she admitted, she might run a generation ahead of me, but that was still better than limping behind like the people I had found in the fortress. Unfortunately, she hadn't met them—except for young Ragild Sasborg. But that girl, she said, seemed capable enough, just a bit timid. And the men—were they truly of no use?

I replied that I could not yet say. They were almost all learned men—theorists I had found in Orlin—and such scholars nearly always suffer from a failing that is quite natural to them: they are too one-sided, and ill-suited for a life of hard action. I myself had once been such a study-room dweller—a stargazer whose thoughts turned more to comets and wandering worlds, to nebulae and suns, than to men and earthly things. It was only through the hard schooling of the imperial count Framer of Akapana that I had learned to hold my head high and my eyes open, if I wished to pass through life unscathed. That had given me an advantage over the men of Orlin. And having had to serve as

helmsman on the sea voyage from the equator to the storm bay of Drudenmark—the sea wind clears one's thoughts thoroughly! Who knows—if I had stayed in Orlin like the others…"

"Then you'd have straightened their necks for them," Katte laughed. "Don't make yourself out smaller than you are, my old duke! If even I sometimes feel a little fear of you—and that's saying much for a Katte Hogger—then you can't be the helpless man you think you'd have been in Orlin. I know you better than that."

"Oh? You're sometimes afraid of me?" I asked, amused, and kissed her beneath the leather cap, just behind the ear. "If that's true, it lifts my self-esteem quite a bit."

Katte nodded, then leaned toward Lutbrand. "Look there, boy! Isn't that a wolf by the forest edge?"

The young lad eagerly scanned the thick brush to the left with his sharp eyes, but found nothing. In that instant, Katte Hogger threw her head back and kissed me on the mouth.

"It wasn't a wolf after all, Lutbrand," she said calmly afterward—but she drew a deep breath nonetheless.

I burst into irrepressible laughter and had to stop the horse. Lutbrand looked up at me in puzzlement, patting the animal's shaggy neck. Katte, too, stared at me in surprise and shook her head in mock reproach.

"And you're the one who always says we young women and girls are silly—that we laugh for no reason!" she scolded playfully.

The matter of the scholars in Orlin was, of course, the first thing reported to my mother upon our return to the camp by the lake. Despite her ninety years, she still possessed excellent judgment.

"You must handle them ruthlessly, Godda," she said. "You know yourself that once you take them in you cannot send them away. At the edge of the ice individual people must perish — and all the more so when their vigour is gone. These men must learn to obey, and such bookish scholars are seldom able to do that. They must know that Katte's shooting gear is not only for animals when obedience is refused, but also for useless men."

Yes — my old mother knew no weakness where I and the kin were concerned.

The two ravens that sat on the back of her chair and seemed to follow my mother's words with attentive eyes croaked and fluttered their wings, as if in assent. When I left my mother's tent they flew up onto my shoulder, so that I had to lift them off and return them to her.

"They already love you, my Godda — these birds of wisdom!" the old woman smiled.

Herr Gerdung was not very enthusiastic when I gave him the commission to go to the bailiwick of Orlin as master of discipline.

"What a delightful posting I'm getting, Herr Duke," he said with a desperate laugh, for I had portrayed the situation to him just as I had seen and experienced it and would not sugarcoat it.

"I assure you, the surroundings are indeed delightful," I answered slyly, thinking of Ragild Sasborg. I did not change my face, but Katte gave a little snort and slipped quickly out of the tent. She was childish and liked to laugh, but she knew she must not make Herr Gerdung suspicious.

The knight, however, had already made his peace with the new task. He only begged me to be allowed to go to Orlin in ten or twelve days, for he still had plenty to do with the winter provisioning of our own group. The people in the bailiwick would be warm and safe for the time being. I agreed and postponed his journey. Then my friend reported that during my absence a tusked thick-skinned beast had gone into the pit — a dangerous bull with long, woolly bristles over his whole body and with twisted tusks, which could be a hunter's delight if the method of felling the giant were not so ignoble. It was not entirely safe to look into the pit, for the beast kept a sharp watch and would lash out with its trunk with blinding speed, since it could not otherwise defend itself. Our folk, however, needed its meat for the winter, and therefore the animal must somehow be killed. Now was precisely the time, he said, because it had already frozen over the last nights. From now on snow would probably fall every day, and the meat could be packed in snow and ice so it would not spoil. This colossal creature would save our men twenty other hunting sorties, which would take a great deal of time and always be somewhat dangerous. We must, however, keep the number of our wounded as low as possible so that we would all be fit to travel next summer. Young Haburd still lay from the bite wound the cave bear had given him at the last full moon, and that was already three weeks ago. We could not take a larger number of wounded on our vehicles, which were insufficient as they were.

"So we must blind the thick-skinned beast and then kill it with a spear thrust through an eye socket," I said, though the suggestion horrified me. Herr Gerdung shuddered. He admitted, however, that it must be done, though he had some doubts about success. The animal, even if blinded, would not hold still for

the thrust but would turn its mighty skull so that the lance would not reach the vitals. He had another proposal, which at first also sounded very cruel. He wanted to freeze the beast to death on one of the coming frosty nights. It could be arranged to divert water from a higher brook into the pit. Of course this should only be done once the bitter frost set in, as it had done last year. Until then he would have the beast fed with hay and leaves. Our youth could do that work, of course under supervision, so that the noble game would not be teased or tormented.

I expressed doubts, for I did not believe that water in the pit would freeze solid even in a hard frost. It would probably only harden at the surface. Herr Gerdung, however, thought that would be sufficient — at least to freeze the beast's head. In such a fettered state a sharp lance could then be driven quickly and easily into the animal's brain.

I had to admit that it must be done, but I felt a guilty conscience about it, no less than Herr Gerdung did, and we both felt like unknightly fellows when we resolved it. My friend led me to the trap so that I might see the quarry.

It was indeed a terrifying sight that met me. I had of late often seen such creatures in the open and had always kept clear of them, because I lacked the weapons to attack with any hope of success. This giant, sitting in our pit, was suspicious and very alert. It gave a wild trumpet when we approached — a sound that would have raised the hairs on one's arms, had the beast not sat so hopelessly fixed in the deep pit. It squatted on its haunches, apparently having suffered a broken bone in its fall. What I saw was an unworthy torment, but nothing remained for us but to act thus. We absolutely needed the meat of this mighty beast, and therefore we had to be unscrupulous and cruel. In the depths I could make out the terrible skull of the ancient creature with its leathery, carpet-sized flaring ears, its narrow bony brow, and the trunk as thick as a tree and covered in wool — which darted up from the pit upon us from time to time with lightning speed to seize us.

Yes, only Herr Gerdung's proposal remained. We must freeze the giant and then put the defenseless creature to shameful death with the spear.

That was still more humane than the days-long tortures the Drudians had told me of — how they too trapped such animals in pits and then slowly stoned them to death with boulders. The Drudians' stone weapons were all the less suited to dispatch such great beasts quickly and without cruelty.

The decision stood. I needed the meat doubly now, since I would probably have to feed the bailiwick's garrison as well in order to keep hunger from the fortress, a guest of winters past. This had to continue until Herr Gerdung had turned the scholars into fearless hunters who would fetch their meat from the open wild as true men do. They had done so occasionally, as

Gurtur Ase Sasborg had told me, but they were not hunters; at most they had come at reindeer. They had not dared to tackle the dangerous red stag or the cave bear. Among the men of my little band it was, at least for the young fellows, a matter of honour that each should try, if possible, to attack the boar or the red stag alone with the spear, and the killing of a cave bear was the proud dream of every true young man.

I knew well that this spirit was due to the hard, knightly discipline of Herr Gerdung von Gaardepoort. I myself had twice tasted the hunter's fortune and had faced the cave bear unhurt — once, it is true, with the help of Frau Katte and Herr Gerdung. And strictly speaking I ought not to tell of that shot by my young Katte as a sportsman's tale; but we lived at the edge of the northern ice, not in flourishing Atlantis. There notions of honour change in two directions: they raise certain demands and lower others. Yet on my long march to Hellas I came to see that these changes did no harm to our nobility; indeed a new, hard and cool nobility with unwritten, relentless laws was forming, one that matched the demands of an unbelievably harsh and bitter time.

I too came under the sway of these new laws and later had the chance—in the hardest hour of my life—to live them out in deed, while the Ancient Brother in the heavens played upon me the most terrible stroke he could devise. Yet I doubt, I, the heir of free spirits from a free age, that the Ancient Friend truly possesses qualities as if he were a man. But I am accustomed to speak of him in human terms, because others do so, and perhaps I would not be understood if I spoke of him as I know him to be.

The free spirits, bearing the ten-thousand-year inheritance within their souls, have no faith. They possess only a knowledge of the divine—and knowledge is greater than faith. Yet, since it also pleases me at times to speak of the Divine as of my friend, let the name of the Ancient One remain my noble right—to know him, yes, but a silent right: to know him without naming him.

In a thicket near the pit stood three wolves, staring fixedly toward us. They sensed that a doomed prey was trapped here. Yes—they too were predators by trade; and if I had not formerly regarded the wolves with a certain respect, I now admitted to myself that they were no different from what I had become: a hunter and a taker, seizing prey to still hunger and to increase power. I caught myself thinking that this relentless overthrowing of resistance—our almost daily occupation—brought forth in the soul a sudden pride, a kind of haughty exultation that I had never known before. The exalted state of the soul that comes with scientific success is of another sort, far less forceful and radiant. In the science of the mind, in its triumphs, there lies no conquered foe—no creature of fur, fang, and claw lying beneath our feet, enduring our weight.

Yet for all this pride, I was not blind to the fact that our Nordic kind stood at the beginning of a new culture—forced to start anew with the meagerest

means. The few men and women saved from the great downfall would, within mere decades, vanish—without the chance to pass on to their descendants the knowledge and tools of the past high civilization. Even in the first years of our wandering, it was no longer possible to give the young anything more than the mother tongue itself. It was simply unthinkable to teach them reading, writing, or arithmetic—to give them even the smallest foundations that once had been taken for granted.

The long winter nights of the Ice Age frontier might have tempted us to school the youth—but such an attempt was already forbidden by the lack of adequate light, and by the pressing need to train them instead in the most urgent tasks of survival and the satisfaction of the simplest necessities. No one can imagine how much time was needed now to sew a simple leather tunic—something one once ordered from a tailor—or to tan a hide, which, a mere seven years before, one could have bought in the cultural centers of the Realm, where goods from every land of the Earth lay neatly arranged in well-managed shops.

Sewing with a laboriously fashioned piece of bone, carved into the shape of a coarse needle whose eye one had to bore through the brittle bone by days — nay, weeks — of rubbing with a stone awl, demanded endless patience and perhaps greater skill than the handling of the delicate bronze needles once produced in quantity. Our youth had to spin threads in winter from the wool hairs of the animals—very coarse threads, because neither the craft nor the tools were known or available. True, we had the capable Saland, who made for us a small loom that could be taken apart and therefore carried, but on it one could weave only very narrow strips of cloth, and the stuff was so coarse one would shudder to wear it. Round the fire one spoke of Atlantis, of the golden age, and people hoped for an improvement in our condition, since it could not be that all culture had been destroyed so completely. I, however, knew exactly that within a few years we would sink to a very low level of humanity, and that it might take millennia again, until with growing prosperity and some calming of relations among men a new culture could emerge. The few Atlanteans of the drowned age were thereby made ever lonelier. The rising generation no longer understood us. It felt, perhaps, the towering superiority of our spirit and our knowledge and submitted to our leadership willingly, because with its native cleverness it saw how well the kin fared under us—but the gulf between us widened more and more. In any case I found that over the years I was regarded with a superstitious awe; indeed I was feared and yet loved at the same time. I was regarded, rightly enough in that simple environment, as the embodiment of the wisdom of a sunken culture and as the possessor and steward of knowledge of bygone millennia. When I lost my eye to Cuzco's arrow on the plateau of the fortress Akapana in Aztlan, fever gave me a clarity about the nature and constitution of the Earth's new companion, the moon. I knew that only in fever had I flown that strange flight through the cold garden of space to the new star, but because I had sometimes joked more than I meant it to Herr Gerdung and other friends — "I gave up an eye for a great insight" — the tale spread through

my kin that I was also a lord of the heavens and knew more of stars and suns than a man of flesh and blood could know.

When our young fishermen, who fetched food for us from the lake with its shifting water-level, were careless and left their tackle on the shore, I would sometimes warn them and say: on such-and-such a day, in that many days' time, the water will rise — so take your lines and nets to safety in time. The fulfilment of such warnings was taken as supernatural knowledge, because it was reliable and, of course, always correct. That I had learned the cycle of the new moon by years of observation and knew the times of its approach to and retreat from the Earth — that it was nothing but an astronomical knowledge, and a very simple one at that — the young could not know or understand. Even the men who had seen Atlantis, like Herr Gerdung von Gaardepoort, the wheelwright Saland, the galley oarsman Forsanti, the farmer and laborer Luhre, were not learned men but capable, generally educated craftsmen and fighters, who could not follow me in such matters.

So long as my highly educated old mother lived, I was not entirely alone; and over the years she enjoyed the reverence due a seer, for her wisdom had brought rich blessings for the clan's survival in countless cases. When my mother later died, I lived in real spiritual loneliness, among beloved folk whom I could not truly reach because the gulf had become too wide. They all clung to me, and I do not know whether there were exceptions — I think not — and Katte Hogger as my wife and duchess showered me with her young love, which grew rather than dwindled year by year. Yet Katte too sometimes suffered a dull fear, as she once confessed to me. She had broken out of the ring of an age-old culture at the threshold of her maidenhood and been set, abruptly, into the nothingness of a destroyed time. Her education had remained slight; she had not gone beyond the schooling of her childhood, but she stood high above the others because at least she could read and write. Yet she no longer understood what moved me on earth and among the stars, what I thought and pondered. She was a child of the new age; she ran a generation ahead of me; she was a beginning out of the depths of human culture, and in that respect the chasm between her and me could not be bridged. For that, however, she was fully equal to the hard demands of need — reliable and honorable — and she believed herself especially blessed by fortune to have won the old Godda Apacheta, the one-eyed, somewhat uncanny scholar and friend of the starry heavens. She was perhaps the only one of my kin who knew that with the godlike aspect of the sage of Aztlan at least a good measure of cheerful humanity was joined.

Winter fell upon the land of Drudenmark.

How short, but how lovely the summer had been! Hardly three months had passed when snow again sifted daily from the gray sky, when the storm howled about the winter camp, when the pitiless frost crept from the north across the bare woods and snow-covered meadows. Now came the long night

with its few thinned hours; now came the crawling into the warm cave, as the bear does, to carry one through the hard seasons.

Almost daily the old earth twitched in short violent shocks, kneaded by the tidal pull of the new moon, whose changing gravity kept the crust of our planet in constant unrest. It almost no longer struck me that it was so, and the others also seemed to grow used to it, though heads would still lift tensely whenever the ground moved beneath us. It was astonishing with what determination and cheerful confidence all the people for whom I had to provide endured this life. Compulsion was an excellent teacher! They now knew no other way. But they knew that I would one day lead them into warmer, more southern lands where the king awaited us and the sun shone warm from the sky; where the Ice Age would no longer stretch its cold arms and where the great resting would come after long deprivation and bitter need. I had not promised it to them, yet they associated Hellas with a rescued piece of the realm, a part of golden Atlantis, the blooming, sunlit homeland — and they hoped without ceasing for Hellas.

But above me the singing-swans flew south.

With a metallic rushing sounded their outstretched wings. The beautiful creatures left their homeland once more to return the following summer, steadfast and faithful, even if it were only for a short summer they were allowed to spend at the edge of the northern ice.

O you singing-swans of Thule!

The Rose Stone

A compacted avalanche—that is what Godda Apacheta had become; a rolling mass of ice such as thunders down from the crags of the Alpine mountains, at whose base we continued our wandering eastward, northeastward—toward the distant goal, the land of Hellas.

A gatherer the star-wise man of Aztlan had become: a preserver of the old and a creator of the new. Like a snow-roll, in the last seven years the little people had grown as they wandered farther, and I gathered up the wreckage lying along the road—the fragments left behind from the great shipwreck of mankind. My means were force and kindly persuasion, as circumstances required; yet, the stronger I became, the more often I succeeded in renouncing force altogether.

It had not been without heavy sacrifices! Herr Gerdung von Gaardepoort lost his right arm and had to learn to fight with his left. My old carpenter Saland had fallen. Gurtur Ase Sasborg, the lord of Orlin Fortress in the Drudenland, lost a leg up to the knee—but from the day of his recovery he was again in the saddle as before, and had become a brave fighter, an honorable and capable man, free of despair and without reproach.

Battle-death had created many hard gaps in our little wandering folk, but the losses were more than offset by the steady influx of people we gained on the road to Hellas. Whole groups—thirty or more men and women of Atlantean blood—joined us, even several small communities of women who had banded together into fighting companies so as not to fall by theft from one hand to another!

I treated these women with deliberate reverence, for I rightly presumed a noble spirit in them. Naturally I gave them full freedom of choice, as did all the women of my people, and in no long time they became our friends and married—though in their own war-bands, when they were still independent, they had sworn the opposite.

Even in later years I met such bands consisting only of women and girls—the Hellenes called them Amazons—and there were battle losses in our clashes with them. I remember with admiration their bravery, born from the feeling that there exists a boundary beyond which a woman must no longer endure shame or violation. Katte Hogger, too, had thought thus when I first met her upon the ice before the Windbirge.

In the eighth year of our wandering I resolved to turn northward from the foot of the Alps. This happened after a victorious battle against Teuten tribes

who had joined into larger groups and built their strongholds in the water—upon great lakes and river channels fed by the glacial streams of the Alpine lands.

These fortresses stood upon piles, and their inhabitants had risen to a rather high level of culture, which, given the short time left to them since the catastrophe of the Earth, was truly admirable.

It was in the middle of summer, during our wandering, that I was attacked—first by small groups whose force in battle made me wary. My suspicion grew, so that I could not later be taken by surprise, when my war-host, now numbering nearly two hundred northern men, was set upon by about the same number of Teuten warriors.

Gerdung, with my consent, had seized women of Atlantean blood and also captured several Teuten women. For this reason, peaceful understanding could no longer be expected. Nor was retreat possible, given my immense train of women and baggage, tools and provisions; therefore, I accepted the first great battle—a struggle that could decide the survival of the people itself.

Leadership and discipline among my men won the day and brought eighty northern warriors into my captivity—among them a number of Atlanteans as well. The spoils in women and children were also great. Most welcome to me, however, were the wagons and sleds, which testified to a well-developed craft among the enemy.

I was content with the victory I had won, for the land north of the Alps seemed very populous. A second battle could bring our ruin, because I could not put all my men into the fighting line while the prisoners had to be watched. I therefore withdrew northward to get closer to the ice-boundary. There I would no longer be under the constant threat of an agitated populace that, like myself, was resolved to prove its claim to life by the sword. Besides, on the Alpine edge these were the remnants of a strong, battle-hardened group of northern folk who, in part like mine, were still armed with weapons of Atlantean origin. My men did not quite understand why I wanted to fall back to the ice-edge after a victory. They hoped for still richer booty and would gladly have risked another great engagement. Some of the newly come young men therefore tried to confront me. I had to act with lightning speed and, for the first time in our nearly eight years of wandering, carry out five death sentences.

I spoke of my resolve to have five young men beheaded with my old mother. She said, “Katte should shoot them.” She still remembered the Windbirge and the early days of our wandering. Her ninety-eight years weighed heavily on her, and I often thought with deep sorrow of the possibility of her death. I was used to hearing her view on all grave decisions, but now I saw the time coming when I would have to do without the counsel of my most faithful friend in life.

Katte Hogger had borne me two sons. She was a radiant, overjoyed mother and looked forward to the third son she expected. In her opinion it would, of course, be a boy again—and in time she was proved right. Katte, moreover, did not worry about the clan's future as my old mother did. She said:

"Dear old duke! I give you five—if you wish, I'll give you more god-sons and ice-kings, dukes and sword-knights. What you do with them and with the rest of our great people is for you alone to know. You always do what you deem right, and so far it has always been right. What you declare as justice becomes the law of the clan, and so it shall remain. If it were otherwise, we would never reach Hellas. I have come to see how long such wandering on the ice-edge must last; that in a year we have hardly two full months for travel, and that the third summer month is each time needed for preparation for winter. You knew all this beforehand, and it is good that we did not. I pity the five young men from my heart because you will kill them—they are fine strong fellows—but they must be taken from the earth, for I do not wish to lose my sons one day simply because you were too soft. I myself have slain a son. That was very hard, my Godda; you do not know how hard it was, and I would not wish that sorrow on you which remains in the heart, though the years may soften it. You will never need to slay a son, because you can be ruthless and hard at the right time."

When Katte Hogger said this to me she sat on a wooden chair with a high ducal backrest on a grassy slope. In the hollow of the valley my clan lay about like a great army by a little river, and the leader's tent, lined with captured red silk, stood wide open to let in the summer sun. In the tent my old mother lay on a beautiful soft bed that Saland had made for her before he fell in battle. She listened in silence as I spoke with Katte. In recent years my mother had grown increasingly silent. She wished, perhaps, to pass quietly out of the world. Only when I asked her would she give short, hard answers, for almost always the questions I sought her counsel on were decisions that demanded hardness.

My little sons played with the dogs on the grassy slope. They shot their small arrows from tiny bows into the distance, and the dogs had to fetch the shafts intact and return them with raised paws. My mother's ravens joined in the game and tried to snatch the sticks from the dogs. It was very comical—especially when they succeeded—and the children's laughter and joyful shouts rang clear and bright over the hillside, so that even my mother smiled. When the ravens, in their impudence, were too roughly teased by the children and dogs, they flew to my shoulders and looked down proudly and boldly at the leaping, barking dogs who tried to reach them—but, out of respect for Duke Godda Apacheta, did not dare the final decisive jump.

The children had a fine time on such summer days. The boys were well cared for and as clean as children can be when released to play. What they

looked like afterward, I will not describe, though they were, after all, the sons of the star-wise man and Duke Apacheta.

Katte Hogger had my black scholar's mantle on her knees—the cloak my queen had worn for five years. This worn garment was a painful reminder. Even Herr Gerdung von Gaardepoort did not like to see it. He had taken the cloak from me in Aztlan, believing I had fallen, and had brought it to Atlanta Framer as a keepsake of the dead star-wise man of Aztlan. Later, Atlanta had given it back to me, but the five pearls on the breastpiece—the insignia of my dignity as royal astronomer—had been lost.

Now Katte Hogger sat in the northern summer sun, sewing with flushed cheeks her own pearls onto the old silk cloak, which was tattered and much mended, scarcely a cloak anymore. Yet my wife dearly wished me to wear it in summer. She said the black silk looked very distinguished, and that when I walked in it, tall and upright, I looked from behind like a youthful hero. As she said this, she lifted her smooth, blooming face toward me and smiled.

"Now that the sun is shining on your face—even from the front," she teased. But she thought it best to offer her red lips as compensation for this wifely mischief—an offering that always sufficed as full atonement. Katte Hogger was twenty-six years old, and her lovely freshness made every word she spoke, every gesture she made, a delight to me. That I could love a woman so deeply and tenderly again I had never imagined—but it was necessary that I did, for otherwise my life as duke would have been very hard. Katte and the boys bound me personally to my little people—Katte called it "our great people"—and through her and the children I felt kinship with every family that wandered with me toward Hellas.

"Ragild Sasborg will soon give Herr Gerdung a son," Katte told me—something I had long known. "So far the knight has only a daughter. Sons are more important now."

That was true. In recent years so many girls had grown up—or come to us as captives—that we had a surplus of women. Now, too, there were the captured girls and women from the northern border of the Alps. The men who had surrendered after the battle were mostly young and unmarried. Once they had adapted to my people and become living parts of our great clan, they even had the privilege of choice—and such freedom of choice I considered desirable. Katte Hogger threaded her pearls. She had bored the holes herself, and I could well imagine what labor that must have been—many weeks of work, perhaps! But her old duke must appear dignified, and, if possible, even fine-looking. I bent over my Katte and kissed her blond braids, wound around her head.

"I need a name for your third son," Katte said. I thought for a moment. It was still early, but why not think about the names one wishes to give one's

descendants? The eldest boy, now four, was named after the king—Balder. My second, a little lad of three, bore the name Lund, after Katte Hogger's father. The third, expected soon, was to be called Ruder, after my old master builder and sculptor in Aztlan.

"I want to have a Godda at last," Katte objected. I understood her wish, but I feared it greatly, for I would not give that name again.

That I already had a son by that name I could not tell Katte. I was bound to the king by an unbreakable vow of silence. There was no son of Apacheta and Queen Atlanta Framer—there was only the crown prince, Godda Acora, the king's son. I almost always blushed when Katte asked about my name.

"There's something wrong here," she said suspiciously. "Why won't you give one of your sons your name?"

"I must first ask the king," I said coldly. "The king has given my name to his own son. I cannot judge whether he would agree that I now bestow that name on one of my own sons. In any case it would be very rude and unknightly if I did so without asking him."

Though I was not exactly lying, I felt like a liar. It was a heavy burden that I could not tell my wife about my son Godda. But the obligation to the king took precedence. I fell silent.

Behind me, before the leader's tent, the blue banner with the silver hooked cross flapped in the wind. By right of royal vassalage I bore the imperial standard.

I looked around. No — I would keep my vow of silence, come what might. My king should not be mistaken in Godda Apacheta's loyalty.

The two huge guards who stood beneath the banner lifted their heads when my gaze fell upon them. They belonged to the select cadre of young leaders that Herr Gerdung was training with knightly severity. At the same time these young men served as the core force for decisions in battle — an arrangement I had known from the king's army and which had proven effective.

They had to earn that privileged standing by the sternest manly discipline and by performance. But they were proud as eagles and would not have traded places with anyone for the softer life.

As leader I retreated ever more into solitude. Only before great decisions did I speak to them or to the whole people. That was still possible for the moment, because my voice was just strong enough to be heard by a crowd of

seven hundred northerners. I then explained the resolutions I had ordered, either before or after their execution — it made no difference — for I thought it right that the men should always know what it was about and why the relentless severity I imposed upon them was necessary. I explained that only thus could they preserve proud freedom in the hard years of wandering: the freedom of the whole people and the certainty of reaching the goal despite all the adversities of fate. Only he who protected both with the sharp sword — in attack and defence, but best always on the attack — could remain master of his life on earth. This was not a question of right; that right alone we preserved by our presence. It was a question of power. Power must be fought for, for it is never given. If the old earth trembled and shook beneath us a hundred times, if the ice-giants of the north threatened as hard and inexorable as ever, the free man of Thule would stand beside his brother, his friend, his father, and force with the sword's point what would not be given willingly. I would rather, like a god, press my will upon the earth freely and independently and live hard and full of dangers, than be another's servant and enjoy a comfortable, deceiving existence. And as I, who am old and might therefore have a claim to quiet contemplativeness, desire this, so I expect it doubly and trebly of them, who are young and can bear deprivation more easily than old men.

"Well, Herr Duke!" Herr Gerdung used to say to me then. "You have helped me again, and I will have an easy time with the young fellows for many months. You are a magician of words. Godda Apacheta, the star-wise man of Aztlan, himself reaches toward the stars he sings of. With you we will come to Hellas and bring the king two thousand people — people of Nordic blood who, hard-forged on Thule's ice-edge, will found the new nobility of the folk."

I believed that much more would be needed for such a new nobility than I could give men in the hard times of the northern winter; but why should I burden my friends with such thoughts? Today the task was to endure and to win power. When a new noble culture would form, I did not know. But every great culture probably began with power. Only in its shadow, in the shadow of swords, would the flower of culture blossom.

Until then, however, many a century—perhaps even many a millennium—would have to pass. Decline always came far more quickly than ascent. At times I noticed in myself how thoroughly, and without any notable inner resistance, I had become a predator. I did not marvel that others had become so as well; I remained, however, fair enough to concede it to them, even though I opposed and had to oppose my own lust for plunder. The ancient Atlantean culture had been so thoroughly destroyed, save for a few insignificant remnants, that it was only in the rarest cases possible to pick up its threads. I had expected that within the habitable islets of the Ice Age north of the Alps some reasonably well-established culture would still survive, but I had to concede that the struggle for power and despair that had raged in these regions for twelve years, and the predatory raids of starving hordes and refugees from the ice-

bound tracts of Thule, had already mercilessly destroyed here what would have been so important to preserve.

True, in the lands north of the Teutonic Alps groups had formed that were well led, presumably by older men who still remembered Atlantean state administration. It turned out, however, that imperial authority in these regions—which I was now avoiding—had always been rather loose. Fokke Paliso, my surveyor from Orlin, could speak from his own experience, since he had traveled through Teutenland. The peasant Nordic population settled here—made up of Druden and Teuten, and thus racially quite sound—had long shown a strong tendency toward independence even from the Empire, and the Empire had been wise enough not to force on these valuable races what they did not want. In return these peoples rewarded imperial restraint with trustworthy trade, limited to exports of foodstuffs and hides, dyes and a little bit of black coal, metals and salt, and in return they received imports of finished goods of all sorts. Now that traffic had been abruptly cut off. The immediate onset of raiding and small wars of all against all destroyed in a few years what trade had built up. The Teuten, however, were less dependent on our culture and therefore quickly managed, despite the confusion, to band together into larger groups, whose warlike strength I had lately learned to admire. Yet the inner force of their leadership was not sufficient to pursue us, as I had at first feared. They were evidently glad that I and my ruthless host withdrew northward.

Apparently they had already held, even before our martial encounter, a superstitious dread of my band—or rather of my person—, for the prisoners testified that a rumor had spread among them that a god's son with supernatural power, coming from the stars, would break into their land and destroy everything he found in his dreadful path. It took great courage for the people to stand up to such a fate. I was truly proud of such foes who were of my blood. That was Nordic in character—to face even the gods without fear, to confront them without hope, only for the sake of honor. I asked Herr Gerdung to take special charge of the captives, to avoid every humiliation in their treatment, and as soon as possible to enroll them as full members of my people.

Under these circumstances I was able to modify my plan to march all the way to the ice boundary in order to winter there undisturbed by any enemy. That pleased me greatly, for in any case I wished to bend southward at the eastern edge of the Teutonic Alps, so that by following the same line of march I might reach Hellas.

Fokke Paliso made me a proposal. He warned against breaking again into the same regions where I had just met fierce resistance, but advised instead that we cross the so-called Ore Mountains, which, though not very high, were wooded. These enclosed a wide, country-sized valley basin almost in a circle, and at its southern end one could reach the Danube and travel for many days downstream upon that river.

I had, after all, from the Vogtei Orlin, capable builders at my disposal—Master Tormun and Master Ragmut—who could easily prepare the plans for such craft and also supervise the construction. These men had already proved themselves diligent and reliable, for in the building of winter quarters for my people I had always been satisfied with their work. He himself, Paliso added, would gladly place his knowledge at my disposal, since on his surveying journeys he had often traveled rivers and gained great experience in the construction of boats and rafts. The Danube, he thought, would probably be very rich and swift in water near its alpine source from the melting snows; therefore, the vessels must be solidly and expertly built. Fortunately, our people now had heads and hands enough to accomplish what smaller groups or bands could never achieve.

I examined the matter on the map and decided that in the following year, during the two summer months, I would advance to the forested mountains of the Ore Range, but not cross them until the next summer. From the state of the Alps—buried completely beneath ice—I knew that the Ore Mountains might look much the same; nevertheless, for the first time I wished to attempt the crossing of a major mountain chain with an entire people, women and children included. Indeed, my confidence in my followers' ability had grown great, and I thought with pride that the time was drawing near when I might reach the Mid-Land Sea and then try to find my king somewhere.

The king was steadfast and true. Never had I possessed a more honorable friend than that noble man. Once I reached by ship the triangular island in the Tyrrhenian Sea, I would in a sense be at my goal, for there awaited me a message from the ruler telling where he dwelt. Had I not possessed this firm trust in my king, my loyal journey to Hellas would have been a folly. Often the habitable isles of the ice-front tempted me to stay and found a realm of Thule-men that might endure. Yet such temptation could not withstand sober reason. In those ice-edge refuges there were but three months of summer, and even those began and ended harshly. During my wandering years I had once seen the snows of the new winter follow almost immediately upon those of the last! True, that had been an exception—the other summers had been warm and sunny—but regular agriculture, the basis of settled culture, was scarcely conceivable even in the best seasons, since it too often happened that the harvest could not be brought in. I might, it is true, have practiced herding on a large scale, and of course hunting, but the pasture conditions would have demanded a nomadic life. The endlessly long, iron-cold winter months left little room for active life. Not that I would ever have tolerated dull idleness—but I could not, under such oppressive conditions, have led a people to higher culture, as was my ambition. The glacial boundary lay too near; the summer sun's rays could not prevail against the moon-induced thinning of the warm air-shell above the polar regions. The lands where one could hope successfully to settle a people for any length of time lay far farther south. Thule itself was, and would remain, closed

to us for perhaps thousands of years. For that reason alone I had to go on—even had my agreement with King Balder not compelled me to.

When two months of our wandering life that summer had passed, I had the winter camp established. Timber was available in abundance from the forests, both for building shelters and for coal. Extensive hunts provided the winter store of food and furs, and the valley floors echoed with the sound of horns and the barking of dogs. Yet, with the greatly swollen population over the years, there were always difficulties toward winter's end with the supply of coal. At the beginning of the cold season, despite my warnings, there was wastefulness—especially among the newcomers—and then the stock ran short and had to be cut and gathered outside in the bitter frost.

Now the two mining specialists from Orlin, Masters Vaage and Galeta, had informed me that a few days' journey farther north, beyond a low forested ridge, lay the so-called Red Land, which, deep into the womb of the earth—into unknown depths—between thick strata of sandstone, held deposits of black burning-stone, once an important export of the Teutens. The copper-smelteries of the Empire had used this coal, which had high heat-value and required little space. There, in the land of red earth, the burning-stone lay in places bare to the air and could be obtained easily and directly. It had the great advantage that it could be transported by wagon or sledge with ease. These were hardened vegetable layers in which one sometimes found petrified leaves or even whole tree trunks. This deposit of burning-stone had once lain along a sea-bay that cut deeply into Teutenland and was connected with the northern ocean. Now, however, with the general retreat of the seas over the northern hemisphere, that former shallow sea must have become dry land—probably ice-covered.

They proposed that I go there with a larger scouting party, for such a force could travel swiftly and needed no heavy train. My light, dog-drawn sledge convoy, they said, was so fast that it could almost keep pace with the riders. Twenty sledges full of burning-stone would suffice to supplement our coal reserves. It was possible, they thought, that we could return by the onset of winter.

Since the proposal seemed reasonable to me, I quickly made up my mind, assembled a strong scouting party of selected men, and rode north with them while the rest of the people prepared for winter. Herr Gerdung von Gaardepoort remained behind as leader of the tribe. Under his capable direction I could rest assured that nothing would happen to those left at home.

Accompanying me were the two mining experts Vaage and Galeta, the surveyor Fokke Paliso, and, as my personal aide, the young Lutbrand, who had meanwhile grown into a capable knight. My escort consisted of sixteen riders from the leadership corps. Luhre commanded the sledge train, which advanced somewhat more slowly than the riders; yet even this convoy was swift and agile,

since it was drawn by dogs. I had quickly come to value these animals—they were eager and loyal, pulling the sledges with enthusiasm, even over bare ground where there was no snow. Eight dogs were harnessed to each sledge, so that the load was never too heavy for the team. Along the snow-streaked northern slopes the journey posed almost no difficulty, and the good beasts barked joyfully when the light vehicle slid behind them as though it weighed nothing.

Reconnaissance expeditions of this kind were a pure delight for my chosen band of young men. The simple freedom of letting their horses trot, instead of plodding endlessly before or behind the snail-paced wagon columns of the people, was a refreshment and a rare joy. For the nights we carried small, fur-lined tents in which three men could sleep close together. We had, however, left our sleeping bags behind, as they would have taken up too much space. To guard against ground moisture we took thin leather mats. Provisions were stowed in the saddlebags of the horses, and otherwise the hunt had to provide fresh meat. A small, skillfully crafted fire-striker with tinder ensured that we could make fire each day. Indeed, we had already become somewhat more "civilized"! A community of two hundred men and seven hundred women and children had quite different resources than a tiny wandering band of destitute folk.

The wooded mountain range lying south of the Red Earth region was already in early winter when we crossed it—and that was not unwelcome, for the ground was mostly frozen hard and allowed rapid progress. The sledges also fared well, since there was almost everywhere a sufficient snow cover. Thus the little train caught up with us riders each evening, just as we were covering our horses with furs and pitching our small tents. Luhre's sledge teams slept beneath their overturned sledges and never complained of the cold, for the dogs always pressed close to their masters, sharing their body heat and ensuring the needed warmth and comfort at night. In our predatory life, this scouting journey to the black burning stones was, in truth, a pleasant excursion.

We needed only eleven days to reach the goal, which was found without detour under the sure guidance of the surveyor Fokke Paliso. Paliso was an excellent expert in soil composition. He had passed his examinations as surveyor and geologist at the academy of Schoongard, a city and island of the sunken realm. True, he had specialized mainly in the soils of his homeland, Norrland, far in the frozen north, but his travels through Teutenland had also given him rich knowledge here. He was familiar with the black burning-stone and confirmed the statements of Masters Vaage and Galeta—that there were places where the stone had once been mined in open pits. Whether these sites were now free of ice, however, he could not say.

In the forested mountains we found a small group of people — only a few men and women, with but a single child, for their other children had died

the previous winter. They were older Atlanteans, yet so reduced and neglected that they looked more like animals than like men. They at once set themselves to fight with bitter fury. They had not heard our approach because of the sound-dampening, soft snow, and the barking dogs that might have betrayed us were still far off. The people were too starved and exhausted to summon the will to post sentries or scouts. They knew they faced raiders and were resolved to sell their lives as dearly as possible. A gaunt, huge fellow hurled a stone hammer at me — and so war ought to have broken out immediately, as we had come to expect. My men, however, looked at me in doubt and only slowly and reluctantly loosened their swords. Such a fight, they felt, would bring little honor or glory. I was glad for this stir of Nordic hearts and beckoned to the strangers as a sign that I took no offense at the hammer-throw, especially since it had drummed off my heavy shield with a dull sound. Lutbrand drew the leather cover from my banner and unfurled it so that the ruined folk could see that we were riders of the imperial king of Atlantis. The effect was not lacking. The giant who had thrown the hammer limped forward. He evidently had no toes left. He raised his hand in greeting, and I saw that several fingers were frozen off and that the whole greeting-hand was swollen and inflamed. With such a fist he could not hurl a stone hammer! With his groping, tottering steps the great man made a terrible impression. He was wrapped in coarse wolf pelts; his figure thus looked clumsy and misshapen. His head was thrust into a large fur hood, turned back at the sides down to the shoulders so that only the wild, bearded face could be seen — a face whose nose was almost entirely gone. It had certainly been frozen off. This man must have suffered inhuman things.

I ordered the man to surrender with his people and lay down their arms. He refused. He would rather fight and die than trust himself to strangers. The man spoke quite good Atlantean, with a Norrland accent, so I turned to Fokke Paliso, who came from Norrland, and asked him to continue the conversation with the stranger. Things already went better. The man vaguely recalled the name of the land-surveyor, whose family had been known in Norrland and possessed many branches. The stranger came from an island of the Northern Sea, far toward the polar lands of Thule, and had been a shipmaster with a seal for long voyages. So had I been too, though without a seal, for I really had sailed far on the king's galley and could, without examination or seal, call myself a shipmaster of long voyage! What the stranger told sounded credible, and his particulars were very exact and certain. I declared that I did not intend to dishonor his honor, and that he and his people might, if they wished, keep their weapons. I would help him, for we were of one blood.

"You bear the banner of the Realm, Herr Duke," the stranger said, glancing at the blue standard with the silver hooked cross that had once flown on the Windbirge.

I explained to him briefly how that had come about, and then he gained trust. And what surely had not happened to him in a very long time occurred—

tears ran down through his white, matted beard. My young men smiled, but their faces quickly turned serious when my gaze fell on them. They were instantly ashamed to have mocked a man of their own race who was in misery and distress, and now they vied with one another to show the guests every kindness possible.

I ordered camp to be made and waited for the sledge train, on which a few spare furs were loaded. Lutbrand built a great fire in the shelter of a small ravine, and then the poor, ragged kinsmen stood around the flames in wonder and disbelief, holding their festering hands toward the radiant warmth—though such a thing, it is said, is harmful in frostbite. I did not hinder them this time, for their wounds could scarcely have become worse. But they all wept aloud, and we too were moved. The only surviving child, a ten-year-old boy with the old, drawn features of premature suffering, who bore frost wounds on every limb like the adults, was immediately clothed by my men—though it looked strange enough to see the little fellow hobbling about in the patched-together men's garments. Then the strangers received roasted meat, ground beech nuts boiled in soup, and a porridge of wild greens, along with bread made of coarse captured grain—a rarity, but we gladly shared it to win the guests' confidence.

I would not even mention the addition of this tiny group of people to my tribe, so small was their number, had they not suffered a fate that must be called extraordinary. The shipmaster, whose name was Wulf Quaden, and who was a reasonably educated man, told us that thirteen years ago, with his freighter Ragnir, he had loaded black burning-stone on the flat coast of the Red Land—not far at all from the place where my scouting party was now encamped—and had been preparing to sail northward to deliver the cargo to a harbor in Vinland, where the copper smelteries required such stone.

When the earthquakes broke out—earthquakes which had made clear to him, too, the world-embracing nature of the catastrophe—the water of the Northern Sea, in whose southern bay his ship lay off the coast of the Red Land, withdrew within a few days, and his galley soon lay stranded upon the dry ground. But before that, it had been carried some distance by the receding flood, so that in the end it came to rest upon a vast plain whose floor consisted of white sand. He had a crew of fourteen sailors and also several families who had wished to travel with him to Vinland for a small fee. The ship, as befitted such a voyage almost halfway around the globe—as I well knew—had been abundantly equipped with all necessities.

"Yes, I know Vinland," I replied, "though I have not been there myself. There lies, after all, the magnetic pole of the Earth."

Soon afterward, said Wulf Quaden, the great freezing began. Snow fell—of which, he added, I could well imagine the quantity from my own experience. Yet this harmed the small crew of the Ragnir little, for they were

well sheltered aboard and had, over the years, grown accustomed to crossing the former seabed of the northern bay to the old coast of the Red Land, to hunt game and gather fruits. They had also found that beyond the Green Mountains the summers were tolerable, but they had chosen not to migrate there, having seen what befell the wandering peoples.

The galley lay far out in the barren flats of the former sea bottom, where neither men nor beasts dared venture, for there was nothing to be gained there; and it was so far from the old vegetated shore that it could not be seen. Moreover, it had half sunk into the sand from the beginning, being very heavy because of its load of black burning-stone, and later it froze in place. Thus it crouched low and, by its remoteness from the coast, was well concealed—yet served as a usable dwelling for its shipload.

Throughout the long winters they lacked neither coal—thanks to the burning-stone cargo—nor food, since they could replenish their stores through hunting. The small band of Atlanteans, he said, had even felt themselves almost comfortable. He himself, as leader, had maintained order and in time had even gained women for his men from the remains of half-frozen human groups they encountered. The galley, now lying on land like a wooden house, he had fortified into a stronghold, and a few times—rarely though—he had repelled marauders. These raiders had never remained long before his ship-fortress, for it was too hard to lie in the barren wastes without shelter or food and try to besiege.

The crew and passengers of the Ragnir had known no want for twelve years. Many children had been born, and the little community had been quite happy—so far as one could be happy after losing one's homeland.

But in the thirteenth year disaster came. On the snow-white horizon of the north there appeared one day a low, unremarkable hill. It was late summer—that is, mild frost and little snowfall—and they had seen the hill but thought nothing of it. Then came winter, with its darkness, its earthquakes, its wild icy storms, and its merciless cold that sucks the marrow from the bones of every unprotected man.

One day, toward the end of winter, the shipmaster Quaden said, he had gone out in good weather to search for meat on land. There, in the north, not far from the galley, he had seen a massive, broad-lying mountain that appeared white-gray, resting upon a darkish wall—a wall that lay before the face of the pale mountain. This wall had stood at least a hundred feet high, and its breadth stretched almost from the western to the eastern horizon. He soon realized that this "mountain" was in fact the tip of an enormous ice stream, which was pushing that wall of mud and debris before it as it slowly heaved southward—directly toward the galley.

It was, of course, a dreadful revelation. He found that this mountain-high river of filthy ice moved forward—slowly, at the pace of a slow walker—as if it were alive. It gave the impression, he said, of a vast, endlessly long serpent crawling across the flat, frozen plain. Then one day the movement ceased, and he and the crew of the Ragnir took courage again. But that calm was treacherous. How could he, a simple and unlearned seaman, have foreseen that the ice-stream would one day begin to move again—though it seemed impossible that such a mountain of frozen earth could slide further over the smooth, level bed that had once been the bottom of the shallow northern sea? It was, after all, a whole mountainous mass of ice piled with mud and silt, stones and gravel, sand and clay in wild mixture! And at the front of this icy giant, on the warmer days, water poured out, forming real rivers that spread away in wide channels to either side.

The sight of this monstrous, jerking, advancing mountain of ice, he said, was worse than anything they had endured before—worse than the earthquakes and frostbitten winters. The shocks of thirteen years earlier had been so violent that they all thought the ground would split beneath them and swallow them alive—and indeed, for other groups of people, it had. The sandstone mountains of the black-burning-stone region had at that time heaved upward in places, their colossal slabs thrusting and grinding together until the crashing could be heard for days' journeys around. But on the former seabed where the Ragnir had been stranded, this had not happened, fortunately. The sand there had swelled in pulsing waves and then subsided again so that the crew had at times been thrown over one another—but the ground had not split open. And since no immediate danger had existed, despite the continuing quakes, they had grown used to it. The tremors, too, had lessened in force with each passing year.

Now, however, as the sliding, jolting glacier with its colossal forewall of mud and rubble rolled down upon the galley, they realized that their warm, secure refuge would soon be crushed and buried—for the wandering ice-stream leveled every obstacle and devoured all things like a gigantic serpent-shaped monster.

Once more they could breathe freely: a few hundred paces from the galley, the monster halted and lay still for about fourteen days. Because it was the end of a hard winter, no water flowed from the front wall now—everything was solid ice—and even the old, sand-buried galley was frozen fast up to her railings, buried house-high in snow as was usual in the long winter months.

Then, one day at the beginning of the last spring—still in bitter frost, though the days were already longer and bright—they heard the rolling thunder of the icy monster and knew that the stream of debris and ice had begun to move again. Now there was nothing left but flight. He had long before made preparations for it, and the people had been sensible enough to work day and night to ready what was necessary for the trek over the frozen seabed of the Red

Land to the old shore. They had plenty of furs and caps of wolf and bear skin, had loaded sledges with provisions and tools, and were confident that they could survive even these new conditions. They also possessed Atlantean weapons of hardened bronze—though not enough of them, for the Ragnir had been a freighter, not a warship.

They had stayed aboard until the very last moment, but finally left when the timbers began to crack. They had even watched as the debris-front of the ice-stream toppled the galley and slowly, inch by inch, crushed it beneath its weight as though it had never existed. Because the ground was frozen hard, they had been able to stand nearby and watch; the glacier advanced slowly enough that they could retreat before it. Constantly, stones and rubble tumbled down from the upper half of the debris wall, as in a steep Greenland mountain, and the rumbling and grinding of the ice-stream followed them on their southward flight for days—until, after about another fortnight, it finally fell silent.

It would not travel much farther, Quaden thought, for behind the former shore of the Red Land bay rose a narrow but long mountain ridge, which the wandering tribes and native Teutons of the forested mountains called the strand of hair. Against that "strand of hair," the monster of ice and stone would, he believed, at last meet its master—for not even ice could crawl uphill.

I grew very thoughtful as I heard this description and pondered the strange behaviour of the ice-stream with its fore-wall of debris. I did not doubt for a moment the correctness of the account, however adventurous it sounded, for I myself had repeatedly seen and examined such ice-streams. This, however, seemed to be an especially mighty natural phenomenon, and I resolved to visit the frontal wall and the ice-stream to determine whether its jerking forward-motion in this case was also connected with the Earth-nearness of the companion moon. But first I asked the shipmaster Wulf Quaden to finish telling me of his fate.

He continued that they had, in the sharp spring frost, happily—if with slight frost-damage on all limbs—reached the forested mountains. There they had huddled for the winter in covered pits, and, fortunately, the winter soon ended. For weeks they had had no fire; all attempts at first to kindle a flame by friction or with a flint had failed, and so almost all the children had perished. At last they had succeeded in producing the saving flame, and that had saved them all—only to bring them into even greater misery. His group had been small, numbering only thirty people and only twelve fighting men, if one could speak of fighting men after thirteen years of life aboard a secure ship and in comfortable circumstances. In truth they were all unaccustomed to warfare, and the bands living in the mountain woods were vastly superior to them. Therefore what came to pass had to happen. They had been attacked on the hunt—not by wild beasts, as often happened, but by well-armed, ruthless men. In the ensuing fight eight of his men were slain, and the marauders found the pits with the

women and their few children and carried off the four youngest and healthiest women, as well as all their goods, including the bronze weapons. He had been forced therefore to procure or to fashion stone weapons for those who remained. Since the robbers had also taken the good furs, the hardship had become terrible. Until he had managed to procure crude wolf-skins for his people—often with his bare fist against these grim predators—their limbs had frozen, and that was why they all looked as run down as I could see. It had been a blessing that summer had come, for without the warm sun they would all have perished. When I found them they were on their way south, because they could not have withstood another winter at the ice-front. They were indifferent as to what would then happen to them in the more southerly lands. He as leader had known well that any meeting with other bands would mean doom. That was why, when he encountered my riders, he had at once hurled the stone-axe, intending to end the suffering and die with honor. He had known that he had no prospect of victory, but he no longer wanted to win—only to bring about an end.

I asked him whether he and his people were resolved to remain with me. They would then be under my command, for I was the duke of a people composed almost entirely of Atlanteans. If he could submit, he would be welcome. But once he had agreed to march with me, he would be subject to my harsh laws and must accept that, after thirteen years, he would lay down his former position as leader. In my band there was only a single man who gave orders, and that was I. In return he would have my protection and the security that practised and numerous swords offer in this time of distress, when axe and sword, hammer and club write the law. He would enter a small but firmly assembled realm whose lord was the last king, Herr Balder of Atlantis.

When the shipmaster agreed, I asked him whether there were any notable human hordes roaming near the ice frontier and the moving stream of debris. He denied it. Only in the forested mountains, he said, were scattered groups, the strongest numbering no more than thirty or forty people, and they were far less well armed or equipped than my riders. I need not fear an encounter with such bands.

I summoned Herr Paliso, who was at that moment examining the forest soil, for the ground beneath the pines consisted of sandstone, and only in the sometimes treeless valleys was it of softer, weathered clay—the intermediate layer of the black-stone mountains. Paliso judged that the black burning-stone formation began here, though it was barren of deposits, and that the true black stone was not to be found at this spot.

I briefly recounted to him what the shipmaster of the Ragnir had told me, and suggested that this ice-stream was another of those we had so often observed—each driven southward every four weeks by the tidal pull of the Moon when, on its elongated orbit, it came near to Earth. Then its tidal force, drawing toward the equator, grew so strong that the glacier, resting on its

slippery bed of ice and mud, simply slid southward as if down a slope, propelled far into the plains as though by the descent of ice from high mountains.

Fokke Paliso—always an opponent of my theory—became thoughtful, for he knew that throughout Teutenland, even to the mountains of his northern homeland Norrland, there was no true mountain height. And yet, the glacier rolled south! The scholar was so astonished that he remained silent for a long time, regretting that he had not heard the shipmaster's story firsthand. I told him he could still question Wulf Quaden about it, for I intended to ride out myself the next morning to see the ice-stream with my own eyes. Luhre was to divide the guests among our sledges, clothe them in warm furs, and feed them five times daily, that they might quickly regain their strength and better endure the frost-damage with well-nourished bodies. I did not wish to leave them behind, lest they fall into the hands of other wandering bands. Our main goal, of course, remained the discovery of the black burning-stone whose deposits Fokke Paliso knew.

By now my riders had become field medics. They had unloaded the precious linen bandages from the sledges and were busy tending to the frost-bitten limbs of the strangers—many of them horribly mutilated. That was all we could do in our circumstances; proper care would only be possible back at the winter camp, where a group of young women and girls had been trained to nurse the wounded.

Some of our guests drank so much of the hot broth that they vomited—perhaps no longer accustomed to the salt I had added to the food. Salt was a precious good, and we had often gone long without it. In recent years, however, I had seized ample stores, so that there had since been no shortage.

That evening, as the unfortunate people from the Ragnir slept around the fire, I looked at them pensively. I wondered whether it had been wise to take such degraded folk into my people's ranks. Would they not become a heavy burden on my wandering tribe? For a while I was discontented with myself—but then I thought that, in my present position of strength, I could afford a little magnanimity. In the end, I was glad that I did not always have to be a ruthless and cruel marauder, but could once more remember fair and blessed Atlantis—not only in thought but in deed.

I never regretted the admission of those wretched souls. The shipmaster Wulf Quaden had lost all his toes, and no healing art could restore them; even his great hands never regained their full strength. Yet he learned to mount a horse—an act that filled those people with both awe and fear—and he fastened to his sword-hilt a strapped leather cap to steady his grip in the maimed hand. In time he became one of my best and bravest swordsmen in battle, and later served me well as shipmaster upon the Sea of the Midland.

The next day we crossed the forested mountains and stood upon the final ridge—the one the stranger had spoken of, which the wandering tribes called the “Strand of Hair.” Paliso remarked that this name was ancient and likely would always remain so. He had seen it marked on old maps before and remembered it well.

Here, along that long, narrow mountain ridge, I witnessed the most astonishing sight of my entire journey. Wulf Quaden had not exaggerated.

Before us lay a giant glacier of ice and stone-gravel, resembling a vast mountain range that faded at the horizon into a low hill. Yet one could clearly discern that it was in truth an immense, elongated ice-stream whose massive width stretched far to either side; from the crest of that narrow ridge we could follow its course perfectly. The comparison to a monstrous serpent devouring all that lay in its path, as Quaden had made, was not poorly chosen. Before this creeping river of ice, no tree, no forest, not even a ridge of rock was safe. The stream crushed everything into its stony mass and rolled mercilessly over all that lay before it.

As it happened, the Moon was near Earth when we emerged from the forest mountains; thus we had to endure a series of stronger earthquakes. But in return we beheld the incomparably magnificent—and dreadful—spectacle of the glacier in motion. It no longer crept across the level seabed of the ancient northern gulf; it had dammed itself at the base of the highlands, grown colossal in height, and now climbed upward with barely perceptible, yet distinct, progress—accompanied by a thunderous rolling and grinding. After standing near it for several hours, one could clearly see its advance.

I was so shaken by the sight that for a long time I could not speak, staring only in mute awe at this vision never before seen. I scarcely felt the cold that poured from the monster like a deadly breath—so entranced was I by its presence. A mountain-high river of ice was climbing uphill!

It had already scaled more than half the slope and showed no sign of stopping. Its progress was very slow, advancing only in small jerks—and not nearly as quickly as the shipmaster had told me. At that rate, with long pauses between movements, the glacier would need decades to reach the summit. Presumably it slowed more and more the higher it rose.

I had already stood for hours at the foot of the grinding ice. Its forward creep could not have exceeded five paces in a day. The shipmaster’s tale clearly referred to the movement across the plains.

Fokke Paliso paced excitedly back and forth, seized by the true scholar’s enthusiasm. He knew such ice-streams in miniature from his homeland Norrland, where they descended from the mountains and became rivers at

certain depths. But what he saw here was a tremendous wonder of nature. He scraped and dug at the slope of the debris wall until he was soaked through, for despite the hard frost, water pressed by immense force seeped from the rubble. I had to pull him back repeatedly, for loose stones above threatened to fall at any moment. Yet he always returned to the wall. He examined the great boulders embedded in the muddy slope like raisins in a loaf. These stones were entirely rounded smooth, and one could see with one's own eyes how, with each jerking advance, they rolled and ground against one another and the smaller stones.

We could hardly communicate; though Paliso sometimes shouted in my ear, I understood little. The debris wall thundered and roared with a grinding noise, as if it were a gigantic stone-mill crushing solid rock into dust. The inner pressures within this mountain of rubble—piled before the glacier's face—must have been enormous, for from its depths came booming crashes and sharp cracking sounds, as though house-sized boulders were being squeezed together and crushed like soft clay.

The slope of the foothills was clothed with thin woodland, dotted here and there with true forest giants. These the glacier flattened as if they were straws. Amid the roar of the grinding stones one could hear no crack of breaking wood, no thud. When a tree was reached, it bent slowly, very slowly backward, as though shuddering before the dreadful death the glacier would bring. Then, after some time, came a small jerk—the tree, with its massive root-cluster and the rock it grew upon, was torn up and dragged along, its lower trunk buried in the moving debris. With each new shove it tilted again and slid farther upward, until when I returned the next day, the tree was already half buried. At the spot where it protruded from the rubble it had split and splintered, bent, crushed, and finally vanished beneath the stony wall. Here and there a few shreds of white bark and splintered wood still poked from the gravel—and then the forest giant was gone. It was but a helpless stalk before that monstrous river of wandering ice, which had come from the far northern plains, from immeasurable distances—far, far beyond Teutenland, for only high in Norrland did lesser mountains begin again.

Beneath the ice and rubble, of course, lay also the galley of shipmaster Quaden, and it was clear that not a single splinter of her remained—save perhaps a heap of crushed chips mixed with mud and stone, carried upward in the glacier's forewall as it climbed the Strand of Hair.

Unfortunately, I had no time to linger long by that dreadful ice-stream, aside from the fact that it radiated such an icy cold that one could forget it was still late summer. I clapped Fokke Paliso on the shoulder; he nodded, and we returned together along the ridge to the horses.

"The deposit of the black burning-stone is buried beneath the ice," he said sorrowfully. "It lay near the old shoreline, half a day's journey from here.

But I see that all this land is frozen over—and it would have been the same even if we had arrived in the height of summer. We have ridden here in vain."

That was, of course, a crushing outcome. I had greatly hoped for a rich deposit of black stone. With it, I would have secured an additional coal source for my winter camp—something more than welcome. It would also have allowed me to reforge the captured bronze stores into swords and helmets, for Atlantean weapons had become increasingly scarce among my small people.

I intended to ride back empty-handed, since each day might bring the onset of harsh winter. But Fokke asked to remain one more day—he had seen something at the glacier's forewall that he wished to study more closely.

He said the entire phenomenon was so mysterious that he felt compelled to uncover its cause. The mining experts, Vaage and Galeta, were dissatisfied at not having seen a single vein of black stone and asked permission to search the following day in ice-free areas, particularly along the slopes of the valleys. If, as Paliso had claimed, the black coal had once been mined in open pits here—and if Wulf Quaden had loaded it onto his galley—it was possible that other deposits might occur nearby. They had already found the barren sandstone of the mountain range, as I knew, and it would be strange indeed if they did not also find the coal-bearing rock. I granted them two days and told them to take five riders for safety. In any case, they were to be back in the forest camp at the appointed time. I myself would remain near the glacier with Fokke Paliso. I showed the men where I intended to pitch my camp and dismissed them.

Wulf Quaden, incidentally, knew nothing of the exact mining sites of the black stone, as one might have assumed. He had only loaded it at the harbor and, being a true seaman, had never concerned himself with matters connected to the land. His knowledge did not extend beyond the settlement whose port his galley had used. The stone had not been quarried near the harbor, he explained—he would have seen that. Rather, the coal had been brought on wagons or pack animals and heaped up. The arriving ships had then loaded from those piles.

All through the night I heard the distant rumbling and grinding of the colossal glacier—the cracking and splitting of rocks it tore loose as it climbed the mountain slope, dragging them along. I felt the frequent trembling of the ground, unusually restless now that the Moon was near Earth. I knew that the gravitational pull of that mighty celestial companion reached down into the deepest layers of the Earth's crust—and perhaps even deeper—and that the tremors were caused by the shifting of mass within the Earth itself. But they were probably also due to water forcing its way through countless fractures in the crust toward the hot inner regions, where it burst into violent, explosive steam. The frequent hot springs I had observed during my eight years of

wandering through Drudenmark and Teutenland proved that water did indeed reach the fiery depths and was likely driven to the surface under steam pressure.

The solid shell of our home star—which before the fall of the Realm we had believed immovable—had been rent and shattered by earthquakes, and now we lived upon uncertain ground. Yet we had grown accustomed to it, as to so many things that in the time of the Realm would have seemed unbearable.

The following night was bitterly cold. In the morning I asked my guests how they had slept, and they said they had not felt the night at all—they had slept so soundly. Indeed, they had, for the first time in ages, rested in safety and warmth. It showed: their faces were fresher, their movements livelier, their strength returning. But as they took their morning meal, I was astonished—they ate as though they had not had a single bite the day before. I must confess that the phrase "they ate" is charitable, for our guests behaved like the wild beasts they had become in their half-year of hardship, devouring their food even as animals do—women included.

My own men I had already taught better manners. Even Herr Gerdung von Gaardepoort—the quiet, noble man of iron will—insisted on decorum even at table. Such outward forms were not unimportant, even in a time of want such as ours; they gave the young men a sense of bearing that should never fail them, even off duty. It was not easy for them to meet my demands for proper dress and cleanliness, but precisely because those demands were difficult, I insisted upon them. In this, I found in my friend Gerdung a wise and understanding ally. Thus, we remained, in some measure, the heirs of an old culture, striving with success to preserve it in this new age.

Fokke Paliso could scarcely contain his impatience. Before dawn he was already up, trudging through fresh snow about the camp, visiting the sentries, patting the horses, and playing with the dogs that crawled out from beneath the overturned sledges at that early hour. I could see it all, for I too was awake early, peering through the slit of my tent flap. Fokke also made himself useful—stoking the fire into bright flames and piling on wood. He clearly wished to waste no time before setting out.

Soon we stood again, as on the previous day, at the foot of the debris slope that, in rare jerks, climbed the mountain. Naturally, we kept a safe distance, for the cone was unpredictable and sometimes sent down a shower of mud and stones that would have buried anyone who ventured too near. The surveyor moved along the edge of the glacier's front like an eager child, half-crouched, his eyes fixed on the towering rubble as if upon a sheer mountain face. He went farther and farther, and I—uncertain what he hoped to find—followed slowly behind. Luhre, who had begged to see the ice-stream himself, accompanied me, as did two young giants from my special troop. Their eyes grew wide at the sight of the terrible, rolling wall before us.

I noticed that Fokke Paliso had found something. He was already far from me, so I could not see what he was dragging—but whatever it was, it must have been heavy, for he was rolling it before him, trying to get it out of the danger zone beneath the debris slope.

"Master Paliso is rolling a round stone," one of my young men laughed, amused by the scholar's behavior.

And indeed, the lad with the eagle-sharp eyes had seen correctly. Fokke sat like a victor before a round, reddish stone and was washing it clean with icy water. I pitied his hands, for the water was bitterly cold—but it seemed not to trouble him. He went on washing the almost spherical rock, about the size of a man's head, even when I came up beside him, waiting expectantly. Apparently Paliso wished to present the stone to me in spotless condition, though I would have been satisfied had he merely cleaned a small patch. For the task he used his woolen neck-cloth, the same all of us wore for protection against the frost. I told him he would make himself ill, soaking and soiling the garment he needed most—but he did not hear me, for the roar and grinding of the glacier drowned every word. Thus, he never knew I had spoken with mild mischief.

When he had finished washing, he lifted the stone onto his shoulder and carried it up the slope. In a hollow behind some gray sandstone rocks he dropped his burden. There, standing in the sound-shadow away from the roaring glacier, we examined the stone, which lay in the snow like a great red fruit.

"It is incredible!" burst out Fokke Paliso, standing as one who dreams yet knows he is awake.

After a while I asked what the significance of the rose-colored stone was, for surely he had not carried it uphill and washed it for nothing. Fokke replied that the stone came from Norrland. It was a so-called Rosenhartstein—"rose-hard-stone"—so named for its hue, and he knew that this type of rock occurred only in Norrland, nowhere in all Teutenland. Then he crouched beside the round stone and patted and stroked it as though it were a living creature. That scholar, here at the icy edge of Thule, was beside himself with excitement! That such passion could still exist after these bitter years of want moved me deeply, for the man was a true scholar and seeker—no different, in his way, from myself. I too could be transported beyond myself when I pondered the influence of a star, such as the new Moon, for I was a star-seer; and Fokke Paliso, being a geognost, could lose all sense of time and space at the discovery of a rose-hard-stone.

"Lord Duke," he said after a while, still breathless from hauling the weight, "do you know the circumference of the Earth at the equator? Yes—I

assume you do. You know, of course, that we scholars of the sunken Realm used a unit of measure equal to one-forty-millionth of that circumference."

I nodded, and my riders stared wide-eyed; they thought the surveyor touched in the head. Besides, the number forty million meant nothing to them—they had been children when the Realm fell, knowing nothing of its high culture or of the mature science that had had no equal on Earth. I told the surveyor that indeed, that same unit had been used for millennia at the royal solar observatories, and that our building-stones had followed it wherever sacred structures were concerned. Even in the highlands of Tiahusinju, the works of Puma Punku in Aztlan had been laid out according to that same measure, and their artistically hewn stones bore it in both height and breadth.

The surveyor drew his sword and traced with its point a sharp arc in the snow on the slope, then took the weapon in his left hand and brushed his right across his brow, as if to dispel an overwhelming thought.

"Lord Duke," he said hoarsely, "I know the distance from this place to Norrland's western point. I can show it to you on the map once we are back in camp. It amounts to roughly one-fortieth of the Earth's circumference at the equator. One cannot draw such a distance as a straight line in the snow—it must be shown as a great curve of the Earth's surface, as I have done here."

At that moment I understood what Fokke Paliso meant. The glacier stretched from Norrland all the way to the Land of Red Earth in Teutenland. The ice-stream had crawled southward over one-fortieth of the planet's circumference.

"And this rose-hard-stone lying before us comes from Norrland," the scholar continued. "It is not some stray boulder that might somehow have been brought here by ship, for I have already seen, both yesterday and today, several other stones of the same kind in the debris of the glacier's forewall—yes, yesterday already, at a place now buried. That is why I begged you to let us stay another day. There can be no doubt that the rose-hard-stone was carried here from Norrland by the glacier. It has happened within the space of thirteen years—since the world-winter descended upon the Earth, since Atlantis sank beneath the sea. Tell me, Lord Duke—do you know how high the loftiest mountains of the Norrland range are?"

I replied that I did not know exactly, but I had learned that the mountains of Norrland were not very high — certainly not to be compared with the majestic Andes of the Tiahusinju Highlands or with the vast massif of Abyssia.

Fokke agreed. The Norland peaks, he said, were steep and rugged, but their maximum elevation was at most two thousand equatorial units. Such a

height would only produce an ice flow extending a few thousand units into the lowlands. It was, therefore, utterly impossible that such modest elevations in Norrland could have pushed the glacier with its rose-hard stones across one-fortieth of the Earth’s circumference—especially since neither the seabed nor the North-Teutonic plains possessed any natural slope that could have driven such an enormous ice-stream southward with its wall of rubble. Yet that it had happened was beyond question. He asked me to look again at the shallow arc he had traced in the snow—the curve of the Earth’s surface along which the current must have flowed. How that could be was a riddle that defied the simplest natural laws, and he confessed he had no explanation.

When I then offered my own view—that the gravitational pull of the new celestial companion did not depend on whether a natural slope existed or not, but that the Moon, when near the Earth, simply created a southward gradient by its own drawing power, while this influence ceased when the Moon was distant—an odd silence fell. My riders, and even good Luhre, looked at me as though old Godda Apacheta himself had gone mad.

The surveyor did not answer me. He looked down at the polished rose-hard stone, inwardly struggling to reject my reasoning, yet unable to think of any other plausible cause. He knew my accounts of the moon-driven drift voyages I had witnessed in the icy Atlantic seas—but it is one thing to hear such tales, and quite another to have seen and experienced such forces oneself.

At last, he said he would accept my explanation as a working hypothesis and would calculate the matter when we returned home. If it produced results better than his previous assumptions, there would be no reason to dismiss it merely because it was new and unheard of. If, indeed, the glacier had advanced from Norrland to the Land of Red Earth within thirteen years, then it must have traveled with astonishing speed.

I laughed when I heard that and told him to make the calculation without leather or stylus—only with his head—for it was quite simple. If, as he had heard from me, the Moon’s gravitational pull toward the south was effective only every fourteen days, then faded over the next fourteen until inactive again, the glacier’s forward motion could be active for perhaps one hundred and fifty days a year—and even then, not all equally strong, for the greatest effect occurred only during the five days of the Moon’s closest approach.

A simple division of years and days would show that the glacier’s daily advance must have been about five hundred equatorial units—or, in the measure of the Teutonic people, roughly six hundred paces. Over those one hundred and fifty days each year, that would yield seventy-five thousand units, and over thirteen years, about a thousand times a thousand—that is, the very distance from the Norrland mountains to the place where we now stood, before the glacier itself.

If Wulf Quaden had spoken of the ice moving like a wanderer's pace, then in the far north its progress must have been slower, meaning that in recent years it had gained speed—likely because it had entered the most effective zone of the Moon's gravitational influence. I had seen something similar on the sea, when I drifted with the royal galley within that same lunar current. Here, however, where the glacier was forced to climb the narrow ridge of the Haarstrang mountains, its motion had become extremely slow, almost imperceptible. Yet the inner grinding and roaring, the frequent rockfalls at its face, the mountain-high piling of the ice—all proved that it had not yet come to rest, and that within the next hundred years it would likely have climbed even this small mountain.

My speech was received in respectful silence—after all, I was the Duke. I looked over the men one by one, told a young rider to close his gaping mouth, and asked Herr Paliso to accompany me once more to the glacier. I sent Luhre back to the camp with orders to harness the sleds and follow with the dogs. For while Fokke Paliso, lost in thought about how the rose-hard stone had come to this land, walked along the glacier's debris rim, he had overlooked something that, in that moment, was more vital to our survival at the ice frontier than all a scholar's discoveries.

Smiling to myself, I descended toward the foot of the glacier, thinking of my two mining experts, Vaage and Galeta, who were searching for black coal and likely would not find it. I was fairly certain that the old deposits once exposed to daylight were now buried beneath ice and snow, and that their expedition would end fruitlessly.

I had noticed a spot on the glacier's rubble wall that had caught my attention earlier, and I found it again at once. Admittedly, one could easily have passed it by without noticing anything remarkable; I had only been alerted by a slight movement halfway up the slope. There, a massive slab of sandstone jutted out from the debris wall. Its edges were already somewhat rounded, but it could not have been long in the glacier's grasp, for it was not yet ground smooth or crushed. It still clearly showed the layered structure typical of sandstone and other sedimentary rocks.

Barely two hours before, when I had followed Herr Paliso along the glacier's rim, I had seen on a broken surface of that gray stone a deep black stripe. I had paused to look at it, thought little of it, and walked on. But later, when I followed Fokke uphill to see the rose-hard stone in the hollow, it struck me that the black band within the sandstone slab might well be the very coal we were seeking. Since the slab had shifted as I passed, it must soon have fallen.

And indeed, the great polished sandstone slab had now obliged us—it had come crashing down in the meantime and shattered into many pieces. At the

foot of the glacier's wall lay, scattered around us in abundance, what we had been seeking all along.

The black coal of Teutenland!

The force of the fall had neatly separated the hardened plant layers from the barren sandstone beds—the strata had split cleanly apart.

"Black coal!" said Fokke Paliso hoarsely. "And I walked right past it—without seeing it!"

I laughed again because he looked so miserable, and remarked that scholars sometimes complement one another in strange ways, even when each is busily working in his own field and by accident finds a pearl in another's. He had pursued his own specialty and found the rosenstone, without being able to say how it had come from Norrland to this place. He had therefore unconsciously found what I had long suspected — namely that the rosenstone had been carried here by the force of the moon-tide. For that reason he had not noticed the other case from his own field, but the starwise man had noticed it, and now the true specialist Paliso was confirming that it was coal.

The surveyor was beside himself with joy; with both hands he scooped up the wet, black rubble and got very dirty, for the dark mud left quite distinct traces. Fokke did not notice that in his happiness. He embraced me without reserve and only now saw, to his horror, what he had done to my white-grey fur coat.

Then the sleds came clattering down the slope with happy barking dogs. The spades were unstrapped from the sides, and in a short time twenty sleds were piled high with coal. That was about all that was available, so the number of my vehicles had just sufficed.

The next day the miners Vaage and Galeta returned from their reconnaissance without success. They were very downcast, but finally satisfied that at least they had searched and could determine that the coal seams lay under ice and could not be reached with our meagre means. I told them that was true, but that the glacier had been stronger than men, had overrun the coal seams and had ripped out and carried along the coal-bearing rock.

The two miners could not resist riding down to the glacier's front wall once more. Again a sandstone slab had broken free at roughly the same spot from the upper part of the scree slope and shattered at the foot of the debris cone. Now the precious coal lay scattered in a wide arc around the fall and could no longer be of use to us, since the sleds were filled to overflowing. But it was not possible, with winter threatening, to make the trip back here again. We had to leave the valuable stuff where it lay.

On the last night of our stay at the former edge of the North Sea heavy snow fell, but by day it cleared and became sunny, though bitterly cold. Then off we went with hurrahs and barking dogs to the south, straight through the snowy forest range — a wild, joyous chase. Between laughter and shouting we raced, sleigh teams against horses. The sleds ran beautifully, and the dogs pulled their coal loads without much effort. Up and down hills, through silent fir woods, over gentle slopes and frozen ponds flew the wild host of the one-eyed Gode — that's what the Teuten called me — toward my people's winter camp. Once a wandering band scattered in flight as we approached, and we captured one of the men, who stood before me defiant yet trembling. I asked him why he had abandoned his camp so hastily. If I now took his tents and belongings, which was my rightful course in this time of axe and spear, his kin would have to die next winter. The man, hardly able to speak for fear and terror, answered that it was well known I was the wild Gode who thundered through the woods with his great host and the pack of dogs, that I was not a mortal man but had come from the stars. But one could not fight supernatural beings. He said not that his kin were cowardly; rather, they had been seized by terror when I had appeared with the dogs, and for that reason they had fled.

I examined the abandoned camp of the people, most of whom were Teuten though some were Druden, found nothing that would be of particular value to my people, and left everything as it lay. I think the man thought the wild Gode a bit foolish for letting them go and not looting the camp as would have been customary. Star-wise men and demigods do grow old, and then they take fits of gentleness that ill suit the hard times at the ice-edge.

Luhre had a few words with the released Teut and now rode his horse beside me.

"Lord Duke!" he said softly. "These forest folk take you to be a real god."

"Be glad that you are nearer to me," I replied with a laugh.

"Even among our own there are many men, and especially women, who say the same," Luhre went on. "If I had not sailed with you on the king's galley and then on Hogger's Windbirge, I might well believe it myself today. In any case I will not contradict such talk when it comes up again, for I think it is good. Your power is our salvation, and if people say you are the one-eyed Gode, that is worth a thousand swords. I advise you, Lord Duke, not to protest such rumours. What helps us to get to Hellas and to the king we must exploit. And to serve a man who comes from the stars — I do not dislike that."

I looked around. To the right, left, and behind me my riders trotted, helmets gleaming and with plumes streaming, lances raised, each a man of

upright bearing. Yes, the one-eyed Gode had welded his wild host together hard! This uniform armament and the bearing of my men did not come about overnight. Years of training and relentless discipline lay behind it. Let people think what they will!

High above our heads the swans rushed again to the south, because they felt winter approaching and had to leave. Tough and undaunted the beautiful sacred birds braved the misfortune that the Ancient One had sent over the green earth. I myself had often bested the noble brother in the heavens, as the swans of Thule did, and I intended to do so often still and not let the reins be wrested from my hand. Was it not a delight for God to have such friends on earth who would not bow and could not be brought low? Very well: he might grant me a little of his renown. Was I not on his cold star a hero, which we now called the moon? It had been but a fever, yet with the sharp, thinking mind no less, and that is the master of the earth.

Yes, Godda Apacheta came from the stars. It was not entirely wrong, what the Teuten said.

I laughed to myself. To shape the earth by the fist according to one's will and to steer with the spirit — that is the highest bliss on my star.

Godda Apacheta was very exultant and proud on the day he rode back to the winter camp with the coal-sleds.

The Wild Host

In the ninth year of our wandering we came to the foot of the Ore Mountains. I did not dare to cross them then, for winter threatened to set in, which could have been fatal if it caught us upon the mountain crest. So I waited patiently and crossed the Ore Mountains only in the summer of the tenth year of our journey, and in the summer of the eleventh I reached the Danube.

Katte Hogger had borne me our third and fourth sons, and I was very proud of the boys and loved Lady Katte fourfold. She was now twenty-nine years old and looked like the eternal spring that bloomed at Thule's edge of ice in spite of winter storms and frost giants. I often could not comprehend that the young woman still loved the old Godda Apacheta. For by then I was sixty-six years of age, and if I still looked at all presentable, it was only because Katte cared for me so well and tended me like an old horse to which one is devoted and whose blemishes one wishes to make good.

Our winter camp on the Danube resembled a small town. My people had not grown much in number, but our resources had become better and richer, and the craftsmen I had trained were now numerous enough to build wooden houses for the winter quarters. I no longer lived, as I once had, in pits roofed with tree trunks, but in real houses, and for each winter camp I had a hall erected with a hearth, where I could host my men in turn and thus not lose touch with them even in winter. I usually sat beside Lady Katte on a high seat, and upon my shoulders perched the ravens — now older, sedate birds — who seemed drawn to me for reasons I could not explain. Though the ravens had belonged to my old mother, guests from foreign tribes who sat at my table during the long winters said they belonged to the Wild Gode. Since I often, out of convenience, did not wear the artificial gemstone eye, I admit that as a one-eyed old man with two ravens I might have seemed uncanny to those who did not know me well.

My hall, moreover, was splendid — as the dwelling of a mighty Ice-King must appear. In the lowlands of the Ore Mountains I had taken rich booty: gold vessels, silver tableware from Atlantean workshops, silks from Zipangu, cloth from Harvesum, a sunken island of the realm, along with Atlantean weapons and fine jewelry in great abundance. To my men and guests I gave with full hands, for wealth from plunder and tribute flowed to me in almost unbroken succession.

The losses in battle had not been small, yet in the past year alone more than sixty young men had come of age for the sword, more than replacing the fallen.

Of the old company that had once sailed with me on the king's galley, Forsanti too was now gone, fallen in the Ore Mountains. The youth growing up

around me knew little of Atlantis and the sunken realm. I myself had become a legend among my own people, for I had lived in an age when the moon had not yet lighted the nights, when spring still reigned upon the earth and not the hard winter. They spoke of me with awe and reverence, as of the friend of the stars, the brother of the ancient god in the heavens — and I could not contradict them, since I had often spoken of such things to my companions. How could simple folk grasp the deeper meaning I had meant to give those words?

In my winter camp on the Danube, beneath the ringing hammer blows of the craftsmen who were building the rafts for the great river voyage, my old mother died in the one hundred and first year of her life—quietly and with the same dignity in which she had lived. She never lost consciousness until eternal peace came to her, engraving her features with a final majesty and nobility. Only at times did she speak my name, nothing else, and so she left me—my most faithful friend and companion. Katte Hogger sat beside me at the bed of the royal woman, holding both my hand and my mother's.

The two ravens, who had settled mournfully on the lower edge of the bed, flew to my shoulders as if they knew their old mistress could no longer care for them.

When my mother's heart ceased to beat, Katte said that now she would be my mother, since she had already been allowed to be my daughter and my wife and the mother of my sons—thus everything that a woman can be to a man united in one. She said this without weeping and without visible grief, and I rejoiced in this honest, straightforward young woman who disdained to cheapen the death of the centenarian with outward signs of sorrow. She knew that in the long decades of our life together I had never given my mother a harsh word or an unkind thought, and she also knew that my mother had done the same. The understanding of the necessity of death had gilded our shared life and had preserved us from every wounding thought and every ill word—for we had used our time as long as we were allowed to be the breath of God, and for when death comes, the span ends in which we may fulfill God's noble wishes.

Katte Hogger had been my mother's constant caretaker in her last years, and it had not been easy for her. Therefore, I took the heavy golden chain from my mother's breast and placed it upon Katte Hogger, who from that moment was to take the mother's place beside the old Godda Apacheta.

In the twelfth summer of our wandering, the voyage down the Danube began, and with it we reached the farthest eastern edge of the Teutonic Alps—my destination before turning southward, where Hellas awaited me. The voyage could not begin until high summer, for on Lord Gerdung's advice I would not give the order to depart until every last preparation had been completed with painstaking precision. Fortunately, my men were accustomed to working in this

way, and they trusted me even when they thought a bit more recklessness might have served just as well.

The Danube was immensely broad and swift, and Fokke Paliso remarked that it had not been so in earlier times. Yet we already knew why this must be so at the beginning of summer: the glaciation of the Eastern Alps sent abundant meltwater into the lower regions. Since I knew that the upper course of the Danube ran roughly parallel to the mountain chain at a measured distance, the influx of water from the glacier mouths was far greater than before the binding of the moon to the earth. Thus Fokke Paliso did not recognize the river as he had known it from his earlier travels, for it now carried a much greater flood.

I loaded my Atlantean folk onto five mighty rafts with double wooden bottoms and high gunwales. On each platform, fifty war captives, working in shifts under the direction of an Atlantean swordsman, rowed and poled to ensure a safe passage. The rafts were joined by articulated couplings—their construction had consumed most of the preparation time, since we had no hemp ropes and had to make the joints from ash wood. From one raft to another five such couplings were laid, which could turn freely on pegs, and I was well pleased with my master builders from Orlin.

On this raft voyage into unknown lands I had to keep my people strictly together, and this succeeded almost until the end. Then the platforms separated, as the couplings—especially the wooden pegs—had worn smooth. But the place for regrouping had been agreed upon, so this mishap caused no great harm.

That twelfth summer of wandering we covered a tremendous distance toward the south and southeast, and when the Danube turned again to the northeast, we left the rafts, unloaded them, and made camp for the winter on the mountain slopes before us. The summer was unusually warm, and it seemed to me also somewhat longer. This must have been because we had quickly reached more southerly lands, where the glaciation of northern Thule was no longer felt as strongly as before, when we had still journeyed along the frost frontier. My cold-hardened companions felt every improvement keenly; they compared and rejoiced inwardly to see that indeed we were moving toward warm Hellas—and that the old Gode had once again led them rightly.

The voyage upon the rafts gave the people great pleasure. They had pitched their tents and viewed the riverbanks in full comfort. Never in all the long years of wandering had they fared so well!

Since the river was very swift, we rafted only by day and rested at night upon the shore or on an island—preferably the latter, since we could then spare most of the guards against possible human foes. When the nature of the bank allowed it, I sent my young men to hunt for fresh meat, which always meant a

whole day of rest—at least for those not on the hunt. Yet since I had over three hundred warriors, an equal number of captives, and far more than a thousand women and girls with children to feed, I had to be patient and sacrifice such days, though they might better have served the journey southward.

In the thirteenth summer of our journey, we came into a region crossed by low mountain ranges and covered with much forest. Game was more plentiful than at the edge of the ice — particularly the wool-bearing ivory beasts, which appeared more often in larger herds, and it was difficult to avoid those terrible creatures, which were highly aggressive. By summer's end, however, we had trapped six of these beasts in pits, and Lord Gerdung killed them with a spear-throwing device of his own invention, modeled after a siege-sling once used by the imperial army. It could of course be used only against captured, defenseless animals, for it was far too unwieldy for use as a hunting weapon in the wild.

From that point on, we encountered larger groups of people, very unevenly armed. To the south, the population grew denser. In hidden valleys we found water mills and many farmsteads whose fields were even under cultivation. I admired the people who owned them, living as they did under the constant threat of marauding bands — no danger kept them from plowing their soil. We usually left such folk unmolested, and were ourselves rarely attacked, for our number, our arms, and our discipline warned against rashness. Nowhere on my further journey did I find any group that lived in such orderly discipline as we did, or possessed such uniform military training. The Teuten on the northern rim of the Alps had been men of another sort!

A few Atlanteans joined us in time, but only a handful; among them, however, was an educated older man who had lived long in Hellas but had for many years been a war captive in the Danube lands. From him I learned that in Hellas there had been continual fighting — at least so it was in the days when he had the misfortune to fall into the hands of some raiders. Of my king he knew nothing, which at first grieved me deeply. Yet he could hardly have known, for he had lived too long north of the Hellenic mountains. He told me, though, that seafaring on the Middle Sea was still practiced, but now only by pirates of every sort. As I knew, the king of Atlantis had waged war against Hellas shortly before the fall of the realm, because it had sought independence, and that war probably still raged in some other form and for other reasons even now. Especially the remnants of the Atlanteans who dwelt by the Nile — those who had not suffered as greatly in the world's catastrophe as the other peoples — repeatedly sought to bring Hellas under their sway. In whose hands the triangular island in the Tyrrhenian Sea now lay, he did not know; in his time it had been held by Atlanteans, and they had been little disturbed there, for navigation in the western part of the Middle Sea had become extremely perilous.

I asked the man why this was so and what that danger consisted of. All Atlanteans were seafarers, after all, and should have no fear of so small a sea as that of the Middle Lands.

Phortas — that was the Hellene's name — replied that it was not fear of ordinary navigation that kept men from sailing westward, but that there was a legend: west of the triangular island, or, as others said, between that island and the southern tip of Etruria — indeed throughout the region toward the Strait of the Sky-Bearer — things were uncanny. There, he said, immense whirlpools raged, two of them especially perilous. The Hellenes had even given these maelstroms names: they were called Scylla and Charybdis, and whoever steered his galley through the one was certain to fall victim to the other. No ship, he said, had ever returned that had dared those waters.

At this I summoned Fokke Paliso and discussed with him the legend, which seemed to me to contain a kernel of truth. We took from the chart stores of the Windbirge and from Orlin the relevant maps and studied them.

Since I had myself experienced the drifting voyage upon the Atlantic Sea and had repeatedly passed, on the high flood tide, by the Strait of the Sky-Bearer — though on the Atlantic side — I expressed my view that whenever the moon-tide rolled southward, a piling-up of water occurred on the outer, western side of the Sky-Bearer's strait, which then poured with great force into the western part of the Middle Sea. But when the moon-tide ebbed northward, the western part of the Middle Sea itself was dammed and in turn hurled its surplus waters with equal violence back into the Atlantic. Thus there was a continual in- and out-flow of immense masses of water through the Sky-Bearer's strait, and it was clear that any ship caught in that to-and-fro drift would be trapped forever, never to emerge.

If, then, the king had reached that strait, he had perished in those maelstroms. The same would have happened to me, had I still held command of the king's galley. Most likely, therefore, my king lives no longer — and Godda Acora too has probably perished.

Katte Hogger, who had been listening as Fokke and I discussed the legend told by the captured Atlantean, shook her head. She said she had learned so much from me that she now wished to speak her own thought on the matter. She suspected that the king's galley had never drifted southward beyond the strait of the Middle Sea at all — the vessel had been far too close to the coast for that. Yes, had I, the one-eyed helmsman, still been on board, my friends would have had faith and helped me steer back into open water. As it was, she believed the king had sought land as soon as possible, if only because, as I had told her, water and provisions had become dangerously scarce. The king, she reasoned, knew the Iberian March, once a secure province of the realm, and would surely have found friends soon after reaching shore.

She urged me to trace the course of the coast and recall that the drift had always leaned somewhat eastward, not directly south. It was more than likely, she said, that the king's galley had run aground on a northern stretch of beach before the inlet leading to the Strait of the Sky-Bearer. After all, Lord Balder had only been trapped in slushy sea-ice, not in solid shelf-ice as the Windbirge had been. And slush, she reminded me, loosens quickly when it reaches warmer southern waters. The king's galley had surely never passed through the Sky-Bearer's strait—precisely because I, the helmsman, had been missing to guide it.

When Katte set this forth with such certainty, I again felt full of hope that my lord might still be alive. The more I reflected on her words, the more I had to agree with her. Placing myself in the king's position, I admitted that after losing my steersman I, too, would have sought solid ground as soon as possible, for fear of running out of food and water. The king, I concluded, would have done the same.

I had no doubt of the existence of the two maelstroms, Scylla and Charybdis—whether they lay at the Sky-Bearer's strait itself or were lesser currents between the triangular island and Etruria. Had I earlier considered the tidal conditions of that passage, I might have guessed at these two surges, natural side-effects of the moon's tidal pull. But I was honest enough to admit that thirteen years ago such an idea had never crossed my mind. My head had been too full of other sorrows and grief then for clear thought. Godda Apacheta is no god or demigod, as the people say, no matter how often his mother's clever ravens perch on his shoulders. He is a man like other men — and errs as they do.

I asked the captive Atlantean further how the waters east of the triangular island — toward Hellas — were. He answered that they must be good; at least in Hellas he had never heard of dangers between the western coast of Hellas and the eastern side of the triangular island. Only the Fire-Mountain upon that island was in constant eruption, its glow shining far over the sea — sometimes, he said, visible even from Hellas at night.

I thanked the man and asked what trade he had practiced. He replied that he had been a goldsmith in Tiryns and had also worked for the Atlantean envoy then stationed in Hellas, until the uprising against the realm broke out and the war for independence from Atlantean world-rule began. Those wars had lasted two years and were ended only by the great Earth-catastrophe that struck friend and foe alike. At that time, he said, under terrible earthquakes, whole tracts of land in Hellas had sunk away; flourishing towns were literally swallowed by the riven earth. The same fate befell the warring armies. The survivors splintered apart and later fought on their own, not as soldiers but as bandits.

He himself, the goldsmith Phortas, had always been a peace-loving man, never involved in war, let alone in looting or robbery. Yet he had learned that in times of dire need, men's actions change — theft and killing can become the very terms of daily life. Thus even he had been forced to become a robber, else he would have starved, and in that guise he had fallen into captivity. Why he had not been slain, he did not know — nor, he supposed, did those who captured him. Perhaps they had needed a work-beast, or perhaps the victors were simply weary of murder.

In this way he had wandered through Hellas for a long time, ceaselessly on the move — eight or nine years, perhaps, though he could no longer reckon the time exactly. His masters had been defeated in northern Hellas and finally retreated across the passes of the northern mountains. Their wanderings had carried them as far as the Danube, and he himself had twice changed overlords. If he might give me one good piece of counsel, he said, it would be this: that I should not go to Hellas. For there, he feared, all the evil spirits of the earth must now be loosed. Again and again in recent years he had seen new bands of people crossing the passes, seeking the fertile steppes of the Danube plain. Of the once-rich cities and villages of Hellas, he said, not one stone was likely left upon another. Yet along its broken, many-folded coasts, new pirate settlements always sprang up again, ravaging — by the right of the stronger — whatever still remained to destroy.

I smiled at this warning. The faint-hearted account of old Phortas in no way discouraged me—on the contrary, it gave me twice the resolve to march on toward Hellas. The one-eyed Gode knew well how to bring order with his wild host wherever he went. His small but iron-bound war-band was pledge enough of that. The "Wild Host" was so called only because it was fierce and daring—not because it was undisciplined. None of the war-bands I had yet encountered could match my men in order or soldierly training. The reports from Hellas, however, spoke of a land where lawlessness had become a daily habit and where the life of the beast of prey had turned into an end in itself amid that beautiful country of blue skies. To bring stern order to such chaos would be a joy fit for the gods—and for the man Godda Apacheta, who had borrowed a spark of glory from the Ancient One. For thirteen years I had forged my little wild host into a dreadful weapon whose name already went before it as unconquerable.

Whether the king—if he still lived—had succeeded in asserting himself, even in a single city of his former world-realm, I did not know. But perhaps I might yet reach him and give him a rescuing hand, if he were in peril or distress. I now grew impatient and would gladly have hastened the advance. I had tidings from Hellas! I was inclined to believe that the long-sought land lay just beyond the next mountains—but it was still far away, and the immense train of my people allowed no rashness. The winters were still hard and long.

No—whatever was to endure had to take its time.

The conditions in the lands about the Middle Sea seemed greatly confused—but so they had been in the Druden-country and along the Teutonic ice frontier! In spite of the hopeless picture painted by the goldsmith Phortas, I could not believe that King Balder of the Realm had perished, provided he had escaped the whirlpools Scylla and Charybdis. He still had with him a core of Atlantean knights and warriors whose number had been many times greater than the little host I had once commanded. Surely, too, he must have met many Atlanteans in the Mediterranean lands, men only waiting for a strong hand to make them useful again. And in the Mediterranean countries—in the Iberian March, in Etruria, on the Triangular Island, yes, in Hellas itself—there had been, in the days of the Realm, whole communities of thousands of souls; they could not all have been destroyed. These lands had not suffered the murderous hand of the glaciation as Thule had; indeed, the peoples of the Middle Sea had not even been drowned when the Moon heaved the earthly ocean at the equator and covered Atlantis. The neutral line between North and South, between ebb and flood, lay roughly along the height of the Sky-Bearer's Strait, that is, along the whole ring encircling the globe at that point.

I thought of Lord Framer von Akapana, the old Imperial Count of the Mark Tiahusinju; of the brave Lord Friede von Schoongaard; of Lord Gerland von Tikina; of the little knight Gießel von Suderpoor; of Lord Rabe von Guttenberg; and of the veteran Sarota. These were true swordsmen, all at the king's command, and the last garrison of Castle Akapana had been of iron—seasoned and strong. No, I need not fear: a man such as the king would prevail. For King Balder, every one of his knights would lay down his life if need be.

Thus I need not rush my march into Hellas, but must appear on the peninsula with full and ordered strength, to seize power in my own hand. With the king's power—by now, doubtless, likewise renewed—we could defy the pirates of the Middle Sea, could build amid the chaos a new and ordered realm, and raise once more the banner of Atlantis as the symbol of our ancient culture.

In the fourteenth summer I stood with my wild host and its long train before the last great mountain barrier that sealed Hellas from the north. Most of my war-captives who had descended the Danube with me had begged to remain in my service, and since they were pure-blooded Teutons and had proven their worth, I took them into my people's fellowship. South of the Danube, however, the land swarmed with mixed-bloods who had come over the Hellenic mountains; of these I accepted neither man nor woman. Therefore, in these later years, my people's number grew only by natural increase—not by strangers' coming in.

I lay with over five hundred warriors on the threshold of Hellas and wintered there. Katte Hogger gave me a fifth son, and when I looked at my future little knights I could say that the old one-eyed Gode in the last half-

generation had been positively followed by luck. My boys were bright and clear and radiated health. They were mischievous, dear, impudent and tender — in short, they had all the qualities the ancient Brother in the Heavens had placed before his friends to develop and to restrain, as the divine wishes of the parents thought fit. I knew well that this happiness I owed to Katte. Her pure youth and indestructible health had broken through in the children.

Summer in the south already lasted much longer than up there at the ice-border, and so in the fourteenth year we enjoyed a sunny, warm autumn we had almost forgotten. I had not pitched the winter camp on either of the two roads that came down from the mountain passes, but apart from them — partly so we would not be disturbed and partly so as not to bother others unnecessarily. Why should I seek quarrel and battle without need, when next year I would need every sword-hand for Hellas? Our camp remained unmolested, for all the roaming hordes that came over the mountains or marched south wisely kept well clear of the wild host of the old Gode. My outer sentries reported with telling regularity that foreign war-bands circled my winter camp at a wide berth, even leaving the roads to pass farther south or north, depending on their direction of travel, before coming back.

Not far from the camp I had set up a training ground on the model of the Realm, where the young men received their first military instruction. The former war-captives were drilled there too. Lord Gerdung of Gaardepoort worked without weariness. He begged me to hold inspections as had been customary in earlier days, and I did so — and often my youth came to mind, when as a young leader I used to attend such placid councils and grow bored. Now I myself presided at such gatherings, even on a hill as had always been the custom — the so-called general's hill that has always invited the mockery of the young, even across the turn of millennia. Perhaps that was the case now as I stood among my higher and lower leaders and propounded my infallible opinion — namely that behind the solemn faces of my young knights in the third or fourth rank, merriment and the mockery of the old commander Godda Apacheta were lurking. I hope so; youth must not change — only it must be taught to hold its tongue; and that can be taught! I confess I was very proud of what had been achieved in fourteen years, and under conditions that had driven other peoples to the brink. Hard times had forged us into iron men, carrying discipline and hardness as something natural, because they knew nothing else.

On a cool autumn day I rode into the foothills with Katte because she wanted to bring down a red stag. I had no objection, though at my seventy years I was no longer a passionate hunter. I had never been one really; it had only become necessary during the northern ice-time, and I thought it good for the young to practice their courage and dexterity. We took seven young men who jostled to accompany Katte against the stag, but Katte wanted to fell it with her shooting gear, which she still handled with mastery. For safety I had the camp readiness saddled and ordered constant scout-contact with the hunting party,

though danger was hardly likely and the roving bands, as I have already said, avoided approaching the winter camp. This time I only meant to watch the hunt and had dressed myself as well as possible for my age at Katte's request. The artificial jewel-eye flashed in the hollow of my brow as my wife liked. Once more the one-eyed Gode had become the splendid knight and star-wise man Godda Apacheta.

We had not yet begun the hunt and rode around a bit of forest separately — Katte with five young men on one side, I with the remaining two lads on the other.

Although we were not far from the winter camp, Katte Hogger and her group were set upon and attacked by ten of those wild, warlike men. As later turned out, my quick brave Katte had shot at once and laid low one of the enemy — this must be said to do her justice.

I heard the rising clash of battle sounds and at first thought Katte had run into wild game. But one of my youths cried:

"Lord Duke, that sounds like a war-cry! Swords are striking metal!"

We circled the wood at a gallop, taking the return way we had come. I sent a young man to the camp to fetch reinforcements, just in case, though it might be that we could deal with the attackers alone.

They must be particularly reckless fellows, or else they had never heard of the wild host of the Gode, since they had only just come down from the mountains into Hellas. In a short time I and my companion reached the scene of fighting and saw that my lads were holding off the small superior force successfully. But Katte was in the hands of the enemy. She lay motionless at the edge of the copse, and beside her knelt a man. Not far off a man lay in the grass and did not move.

My heart tightened. I wanted to fling my spear from the saddle at the kneeling man, but I had to restrain my rage — for with the uncertain throw from horseback I might hit Katte.

I cast a quick glance at the fighting groups. The superior numbers of the attackers, apparently following a prearranged plan, were pushing the young folk ever farther away from Frau Kaffe. So these were women-robbers — the same sort of men I had been for years, for I myself had once seized women without scruple and had considered it my right, and had had to consider it so.

The man who had knelt beside Frau Katte had sprung up, snatched his shield, raised his spear in a flash, and stood before me — a young, huge fellow with a wild new beard and blowing blond hair protruding from under his bronze

helm. He was excellently armed, certainly not worse than I. When he recognized me as an old man he lowered his shield for a moment and asked with obvious mockery:

"Well then, old sir, what do you want?"

I noticed that he spoke good Atlantean, but in my indignation I paid no attention to that, especially since only now could I see that Frau Katte was bleeding at the head.

"Is the woman alive?" I asked breathlessly, swaying between anger and grief. Why should I have to admit, too, that Frau Katte had wanted to hunt the red stag?

The young man answered that yes, she still lived, but she had received a heavy sword-blow because he and his men had taken her for a man. Furthermore she had shot one of his heavy horsemen with an arrow, and for that he had set upon her with the blade, as was right and proper.

"Give me the woman back, stranger," I said hoarsely.

"You want to negotiate, old man!" the fellow laughed out loud. "That's a new way of fighting, it seems to me. You've grown so old by getting through the world with negotiations? True heroes don't grow old today. — No, you won't get the woman back. I'll keep her and nurse her back to health for myself."

My young man had heard the outrageous insult of the stranger and lifted his spear to attack him. But I beckoned him back. What would my lad think of the old Gode if he let such an insult pass?

I was quick out of the saddle, perhaps quicker than my opponent had expected, for he now grew serious and took his stand. My spear hissed through the air and crashed into the stranger's shield. Almost at the same moment the other's spear thundered against the boss of my throwing-shield so violently that the gemstones of Katte Hogger jumped from their settings and scattered far and wide. Immediately after that we were at each other — the seventy-year-old Gode and the blood-young Atlantean who had taken my Katte. I saw at once that this was a fight to the death. The boy fought superbly and with a sword-force I rarely encountered. I, however, struck for Katte Hogger, struck for the mother of my five sons, and I was suddenly very calm and deliberate. The dangerous opponent circled me lightning-quick on his young legs, his blows whistling at helmet and shield.

There was not much I could do except weary the fellow, grind him down with icy composure, and wait for the moment when I could strike or thrust.

The boy and I had learned the same school. In cut and parry we were evenly matched, only that my terrible opponent struck double blows with a dangerous speed that I could rarely employ myself, because enduring them required a good, youthful lung — which at seventy I no longer had. Fortunately my sword arm was protected up to the shoulder with gold- and bronze-rings, but the other nevertheless once got through, and I felt a stabbing pain in my upper arm. The boy had good eyes. He perceived immediately that I was hit and repeatedly flicked his dangerous blade lightning-fast toward my sword arm.

He would not succeed again!

I tested the grip muscles in my hand. They still held. So the wound was not serious and had not severed any muscle. Swiftly I thrust my blade home and struck the man in the shoulder. Now it was time for me to go for the decision. In the long run I was not equal to the lightning speed of the young man.

I advanced. Bent low, I kept my old skull protected and looked for a gap in his defense.

Then a heavy sword stroke struck me on the shield rim and helmet. I reeled, and for a moment everything went dark before my eyes.

Now something strange happened. Just as my young lad sprang in to intercept the opponent's next blow, I saw that he let his shield sink a little. Had I previously so badly wounded him with my thrust to his shoulder?

That was all the same to me now. My sword flashed down and struck the young man between shoulder and head so that blood spurted out. He slowly sank to his knees. I raised my sword once more to give him the finishing stroke, as I was wont to do in all fights. Then his lips moved, and I distinctly heard the words pass over me:

"Godda Apacheta, my poor helmsman!"

Was a lightning bolt from the very old one struck down before me? Had a hallucination deceived me? I wiped my right hand — from which the sword had fallen — across my brow. There — the eye-socket was empty! The foe's blow had blown the jewel from Katte Hogger out of its setting. Blood was flowing under my helm. My son's sword had cut through the hard bronze, and for that reason I had nearly lost consciousness.

Yes, it had been my son's sword, Acora Godda's! I realized that and reeled more from the realization than from the effect of the terrible stroke. The shield slid from the supporting arm to the ground. My young rider tried to support me; I pushed him away. No, I was not so badly struck. Good fellow, I

thought, if only you knew why the old one-eyed Gode staggers about like a madman!

The features of my young opponent grew dull and aged. A pallor gently spread over brow and nose, which set in there with a delicate motion. Yes, that was Atlanta's narrow brow — there Godda's son died — and through the haze I recognized my own aged features in those of the dying man. With a roar my son collapsed onto the bronze shield, his lips twitched as if to utter a few more words to me, and then lay still.

I knelt beside the Acora and took the blond, heavy head in both hands. Once more the blue eyes opened and looked at me. Was the boy not smiling? Yes, he smiled at his beloved helmsman, with the smile of the five-year-old boy who had sat beside me at the tiller. Days upon days!

A true hero does not grow old. So the lad had called to me before our blades crossed. No, he had not grown old — and yet he had had to be struck down by his own father.

Why had the boy not gripped my sword arm more firmly? No one would have missed the old Gode. But you, my only son of my only beloved, my Queen Atlanta Framer, you were worth living. What I thought and felt as I knelt long over the corpse of my Godda Acora — no one knows, not even the ancient brother in all the world; I told no one of this grief. I did not know that the camp's readiness had long since arrived and had surrounded the Atlanteans; I did not know that the enemies stood beside me as if they were friends; I heard nothing of the fact that the sword-blows had ceased, and that a deep silence fell over the circle.

Why had I fought with this blond boy?

I remembered. I had attacked him to save Frau Katte. Where was Katte Hogger, the mother of the five sons of the old Gode?

Then I thought again of the king. How should I appear before my lord? Should I tell him I had slain his son and heir with the sword? The swan-song birds of Thule fly from north to south and back again. Now I myself would have to fly back! I could not stand before the king like this. Yes, I wished to travel back beyond the ice-limit, no longer to Hellas. What was Hellas to me, where I had slain Acora? I stood up.

"Where is the duchess?" I asked. I saw her at once. She still lay at the edge of the wood. Not far behind her lay a dead man, and the arrow of fleet Katte Hogger protruded from his brow. Slowly I went to the outstretched woman and beckoned with my hand. I saw that too many men stood about me. Then I was alone.

Unfortunately I had to hold myself upright, for I felt the gazes of the many people upon me from afar, and no one should say of Godda Apacheta that he had crumpled without a sword-stroke.

So it was in that accursed axe-time! The father did not know the son and the son not the father, and the murderous blades raged for the simplest rights of life — for food, for fire, for weapons, for women — and I had used my blade just as my son had used his against Frau Katte and me. The boy wished to rob me of my Katte and keep her for himself. That was his right of life! He wanted children, he wanted to gain power, like I did, like I did. He struck Frau Katte with the sword because she had attacked. Fine, my brave boy, I had done the same! Women who shoot a youth with dangerous hunting gear must not be surprised if the blade whistles at their head. Women should dress like women so that they are recognized. My boy would not have given a woman a sword-blow. But so it was right. Godda Acora, you did rightly. You struck down my Katte, my merry daughter; you struck my mother and the wife and consort. Only the old Gode did you leave here, and you were so near to victory, dear blond boy. Yes, my Katte Hogger, now you have saved my life and you have given yours. You had the jewel so finely ground in my empty eye-socket, but it had to give way to the blow of my boy Godda. Now it lies somewhere in the grass, the beautiful composite stone. Katte, I must thank you for your love, because the empty eye-socket frightened Acora and pointed his memories to the one-eyed helmsman on the king's galley. Must I then also strike down a predator when the lad let his shield sink?

I put my hands to my mouth like a madman, for I saw madness creeping toward me like a hideous serpent. Two people lay there in the grass, silent and dead — but what had that to do with me? I had seen hundreds of people lying thus in the axe-time of the ice-winter, lying exactly like this, or much the same — with their chins toward the sky or with their necks resting on the rim of their shields. And it had been all the same to me — it had to be all the same to me!

Why then did I now stand here in dreadful horror? Why did I not move, did not sway as before, when the boy had driven his sword across my helm? Magnificent, how he leapt at me — like a tiger he sprang. Yes, that was my son, that was my Godda, Atlanta's only child.

My thoughts circled round and round. I let them run and went with them, will-less. I stood between the two human beings to whom my old heart had clung — between the son of Atlanta Framer and her who had been my faithful companion for fourteen years, Katte Hogger, the mother of my five sons of the new hard age. I knew death. While I crossed blades with my son Godda in the struggle for power and life, the young beautiful woman had already given her brave childlike soul back to the All. She had died as one dies at the edge of

the ice — without pomp, without outcry, with the sword-stroke in the brow, struck down by my own son — rightly struck down, for she had felled one of his warriors with an arrow upon the grass. And I struck down the son — rightly struck down — because he would have taken from me the woman and the mother of my sons, which would also have been his right in the axe-time of the earth.

Only the old Gode had been spared by death. Godda Apacheta was no hero, for he had prolonged his life by bargaining. Dear dead boy, how swiftly and harshly youth judges, and how bitterly it flings grave insults at its enemy.

"Dear poor helmsman!" the boy had said.

A lump rose in my throat. Yes — the helmsman stood before his little Acora, who had once spoken so kindly and childishly, who had wanted to know everything from the poor helmsman with the one eye, and who had so often loved to stroke the brow above the ugly hollow. How could he have recognized me again — with the shaven face, with the flashing jewel-eye of Frau Katte? He had only known me with a gray, long beard and at most with the black band over the eye socket that the old mother had sewn for me on the king's galley.

Fourteen years is a long time for a boy who grows and becomes a man. In those years, nature changes the features and bearing of a child; and when a wild young beard hides chin and mouth, when a bronze helm sits deep upon the brow — how should the old Gode recognize that it is his own son striking at his life with swift sword-blows? He struck my helm — the gemstone flew from its hollow — and now the empty eye socket stared dreadfully at the young quick fencer. Tender memories from childhood flashed suddenly through the youth's soul, and he let his shield sink a little, wishing to make peace with the deluded father.

"Godda Apacheta, dear poor helmsman!"

And at that very moment the sword of the old Gode came crashing down upon his own child! Too late, too late — the sharp bronze cut deep into the lung. The old Gode could still strike. Old beasts of prey still have claws.

Blood dripped from my face and ran in a thin stream over my leather tunic; blood ran down my sword arm — but I did not see it. Over my shoes the red fluid trickled and soaked the grass, which had become a purple carpet from the blood of my beloved.

Slowly I lifted my eyes.

Far around me, in a wide circle, stood my young riders, holding their horses by the bridles. They had removed their helmets in honor of the dead and

stood in silence, waiting for the old war-leader Gode to give his commands. Among my men stood strangers — tall sword-bearers — and it seemed to me they were not entirely strangers after all.

I saw Lord Gerdung of Gaardepoort and beckoned him nearer. He held a late-blooming rose in his hand, which he must have plucked from a peasant's garden, and looked at me with faithful, steadfast eyes. He came closer, stepped to Frau Katte, and laid the rose upon her breast. Then he straightened. I smiled and gave him my hand. I knew well what the rose was meant to say. He had given it to the only woman he had ever truly loved.

I pointed to the slain Godda Acora. Lord Gerdung nodded and raised his hand above the dead man.

"My lord duke," he said softly, "I beg you for your utmost composure. The last king of Atlantis has fallen by your hand."

"You mean the Acora?" I asked, not understanding him.

"No, my lord duke," replied the knight. "King Balder fell last year in the battle for Mycenae in southern Hellas. King Godda, the boy, succeeded him as our last sovereign. Now the realm has sunk beneath the waves — for us as well."

"Sunk," I repeated.

Lord Gerdung stepped even closer.

"Listen to me, my lord duke," he said urgently. "Lord Friede of Schoongaard has just told me that the young king had gone north from Hellas to seek the helmsman. He had heard of the one-eyed Gode and his wild host and said that this could be none other than his poor helmsman — and that he would find him, for he must be close by. He had given his followers the order never to raise the sword against a one-eyed knight, for that could be Godda Apacheta. And only Godda Apacheta, he said, could avenge Lord Balder and free the captive women and children in Mycenae. You must know this, my lord duke, so that no one else tells you and so that you are prepared. Who else should tell you, if not your knight Gerdung?"

I answered my loyal man that I would speak with the men from Hellas in the ducal hall, but first he should see to biers made of oak spears. We would carry our dead together to the winter camp.

"My riders are ready," said Lord Gerdung. "The litters have already been assembled. I ask leave to carry your duchess myself."

"And I shall carry my king," I replied. Lord Gerdung stepped back and signaled. Then the spear-borne stretchers came forward, and we laid the fallen upon them.

Thus the one-eyed Gode marched through the camp-lane of his northern people, bearing his slain king and his fallen duchess, and brought the battle-dead into the hall of the ducal house. On both sides of the hearth stood the biers, and before the hearth, in the center, stood my high ducal chair, upon which the old Gode sat upright — upon his shoulders the two ravens that Katte Hogger had caught as nestlings fourteen years earlier for my mother, and which now sought to comfort the old duke, for on this day he had fought the hardest battle of his long life — with the sword and with the soul.

Ragild, the wife of knight Gerdung, entered softly, bringing water and cloths, and also thread and needle for my wounds. With thin gut strings she drew together the wound edges at my brow and sword arm and bound them with fine linen. I endured it without protest and felt nothing, so numb had I become.

Then came Lord Gerdung of Gaardepoort again, bringing a request from the Atlantean royal men, presented by Gerland of Tikina. The few knights and swordsmen who had met the duchess and me that morning had been but a scouting party under King Godda's command. Lord Gerland begged permission to bring in the traveling group — a few women and children — who lay in the mountains awaiting the scouts' return, and to escort them to the winter camp. I asked how many there were. Lord Gerdung replied that besides the ten who had come that morning — one slain by Frau Katte, three wounded by my young men — there were still forty warriors, eighteen women, and a few children. The small number of women, he said, was due to losses in battle. Apparently nearly the entire people of the king had fallen into captivity in Hellas. He had not wished to ask further.

"What do the old comrades say — that I have slain the king?" I asked.

"They say that through the death of the duchess all is now atoned for," the knight answered. "They say there has been enough killing among enemies — now there should be peace among friends."

I nodded. Later, I said, I would summon the lords to me. For now, I wished to remain a little longer alone with my dead.

In the evening I had the men of the king's galley summoned. There were not many left who entered the hall, for the new and younger Atlanteans who had not sailed with King Balder I would not yet speak with today.

The first I recognized was Sarota — the loyal old fellow who had managed the water in the bilge of the king's galley and whom I had once

scolded for giving the sweet water to bathe the little children. When I rose and went toward him, he threw his arms about my neck and was close to weeping — but he merely gave a short snort and straightened again.

Then the knight Gerland of Tikina came toward me. I had never been closely bound to him, but I knew his loyalty to the king. I extended my hand, and he approached hesitantly, so that I took his gray head in both hands and patted his shoulder. He too could not speak a word, so deeply was he moved by this reunion — a meeting we had all imagined and hoped for in quite another way.

There stood Lord Friede of Schoongaard, still fresh and fairly young, and I beckoned him forward to shake his hand — but he offered me his left. His right had been hewn off, and the stump of his arm was fitted in a leather sheath. Rabe of Guttenberg had been very young when I last saw him, and I could scarcely recognize him now, for his face had been split by a sword-blow, and the wound-edges were still swollen, distorting the knight's features. I pressed his head gently against my breast. To me, the man was beautiful — for his soul had been brave and faithful.

"Where is Framer of Akapana?" I asked.

"He has fallen," said the man of Schoongaard.

"And Gießel of Suderpoor, the swift little swordsman?"

"Also slain," said Lord Friede.

Wittewehr of Tambilo, the gigantic vassal of the Count of the Realm, stood in the doorway of the hall, white-bearded, and approached my chair. I gave him my hand. They all gave me theirs, and I wondered at it — for I had slain their king! Then came Marke, Wilbrand, and Bilrung, the miner from Kalasia in the Tiahusinju Highlands, who had long since traded his ore-hammer for a sword. He had no ears anymore — they had been cut off when he had for a time been held captive by lesser men. Droger of Siminak, the fishmaster of Aztlan, entered through the archway; Henneke of Gaatland, counselor to King Balder; Wehle of Brammerloh, the field surgeon of Akapana, with his sword arm bandaged — but he was the last of the old comrades who had once sailed with me on the king's galley. The others had fallen, died, drowned, or perished, as the axe-time demands of men who fight for power and honor.

The last men who had boarded the Windbirge with me I had also summoned to the hall. There were few: Gerdung of Gaardepoort, Lutbrand, and Luhre. Forsanti and Saland were missing — they had fallen at the ice edge of Thule.

Now we sat together once more — the last of the king's galley — we who had sought to steer northward, and we held a memorial supper in honor of the dead, on silver plates I had taken in battle and from golden cups I had plundered. We had no wine, only a simple beer brewed by one of my folk from wild barley.

And Sarota, the eldest of the king's men, told of the galley and its fate:

King Balder, soon after the ice floe had drifted away from the Windbirge, had realized that it would be impossible to take me, the five men, and the mother back aboard. The drifting had carried them swiftly southward, close under the coast of the Mark of Iberia, but the floe had grounded several times on land, so that the prince had been tempted at times to abandon the galley. Yet he had not done so, for then it would have been impossible to carry off the essential gear and baggage. Thus the drift had continued ever farther south, until the ice-sludge loosened and released the ship. When Lord Framer of Akapana too urged a quick end to the hopeless drifting, King Balder had decided that, at the first opportunity — if they found a stretch of shore free of ice — they would run aground and beach the ship on the sand.

The plan of reaching the Inland Sea (Mitteland) by ship had not thereby been abandoned; the king believed that the easiest and safest route to the Triangle Island in the Tyrrhenian Sea was still by water. A march overland, he held, would be too slow and arduous; and if there was still a chance to travel by sea, he meant to use it. He intended to sail only by day, hugging the coast from landing-place to landing-place, to avoid being driven onto the open sea, where the galley would once again be caught in drifting ice.

So they had run ashore not far from the place where the bay bends eastward toward the Strait of the Sky-Bearer, though they believed themselves much farther north than they really were — the currents had deceived them again. Their fortune, however, in grounding so near the strait had saved the crew; for they soon heard from local Atlanteans that under present conditions no ship could pass the Strait of the Sky-Bearer without being shattered.

I nodded — for I already knew this from the goldsmith Phortas. But I did not wish to interrupt the old man and asked him to go on.

"We remained along that coast for a long time," continued Sarota. "I think it was half a year or more, for we had to replace much that we no longer possessed — drinking water and food, especially fresh meat and fruit."

I turned my head toward the bier of my Katte Hogger. Yes, she had judged the king rightly. Lord Balder had sought land as soon as he could. The hearth flame cast its flickering light upon the still, smiling face of the young woman, and the eyes of the two ravens — which had settled at her feet upon one

of the carrying-spears — gleamed like black cherries. They tilted their heads when they saw my gaze, then fluttered to my shoulders. Now we were utterly alone — the two ravens and the one-eyed Gode — alone amid his wild host. I nodded to Lord Sarota to continue his tale.

And the old man continued:

They had found friends in the Iberian Mark — of course, also enemies, as happens in such times — but the friends had been in the majority. There were still farms with Atlantean owners who cultivated wine, but beyond them came regions where war had raged. The king's power had grown quickly. In the first three years his people had multiplied fivefold through the joining of other Atlantean groups and through births. His first goal had been the Watch-Rock of the Realm, at the Strait of the Sky-Bearer. The watchmen had remained there, without relief, ever since the downfall of the realm, and had fortified their rock like a citadel, successfully defending themselves against marauding bands. There the king had stayed for two years, preparing for the journey to the Triangle Island, where he intended to station a watch in honor of Lord Godda Apacheta, the star-wise man of Aztlan and his faithful friend and helmsman.

When I heard this, a joyful, blessed smile arose in my heart. Yes — the realm had perished, but loyalty had survived! The lord had never ceased to think of his helmsman and of his promise.

I asked what it was about the strait that made navigation there impossible.

"Lord Apacheta," replied the old man, "we have seen and endured much on our voyages — from Aztlan to the Atlantean Sea, from that sea to the ice-barrier of Thule, from Thule to the Iberian Mark — yet we were astonished when, for the first time, we looked down from the Rock of the Sky-Bearer upon the strait. For days the Atlantean Sea stood to the west like a high wall of green glass, while through the strait howled a cataract that, across its entire breadth — from there to the mountains of northern Simbabuie — hurled itself with roaring fury. More than two hundred units of height the sea flung itself, bellowing, through the rocky gate into the Inland Sea, swelling and subsiding, at times calm and even for days, then reversing and rushing again from the opposite side, roaring and howling. The waters fell on the oceanic side and swelled on the side of the Inland Sea into a massive wall. With thunderous tumult the wild floods bellowed back into the ocean whence they had come.

"This did not happen evenly, as our drifting on the sea had once been steady. Sometimes the ocean's rising tide coincided with the backflow from the Inland Sea. On such days there was nothing but chaotic, senseless whirlpooling and roaring. But one could see what this double current and double fall had devoured over the long years since the fall of the realm. Everywhere the eye

looked, fragments of ships drifted back and forth — now out into the Atlantic Sea, now back into the Inland Sea. At certain times, which we learned to observe regularly and which were somewhat safe, we fished much driftwood from the waves and found many names carved or inscribed — names of royal ships, of merchants, of sea-raiders — but surely there must have been many more vessels that lay shattered in those waves."

"The fleet of the King of Atlantis, which had been sent against Hellas, perished there on its return," interjected Lord Gerland of Tikina. "They did not know that Atlantis had sunk."

I replied that I had often heard of such whirlpools. A certain Lord Phortas of Tyrins had told me that the Hellenes had invented names for those mighty torrents — in Hellas they were called Scylla and Charybdis. Whoever escaped the one was surely caught by the other and tossed back and forth without hope. I had once feared that the king's galley, too, had been caught in that whirlpool.

"Yes," answered Sarota, "those same names were later told to us in Hellas — yet the Hellenes likely meant another, smaller whirlpool resembling it, which had formed between the Triangle Island and the southern tip of Etruria. About that smaller whirlpool they were right — it does exist — but it is trifling compared to the one that roars at the Strait of the Sky-Bearer. Between the Triangle Island and Etruria lies a narrow strait. When the waters of the Atlantean Ocean rise in the western Inland Sea, it creates a smaller backflow there as well. And when that subsides, the waters also rush back. That whirlpool too is dangerous, but not to be compared with the one at the great strait.

"West of the Triangle Island, therefore, navigation has completely died out, because the surge of the tides reaches far into the Inland Sea, and the returning flow drags back every ship sailing in those waters. We ourselves, indeed, would have sailed unknowingly into the Strait of the Sky-Bearer, had the king not gone ashore beforehand. There he soon learned what peril he had escaped; therefore he abandoned further travel by sea and chose the overland route instead."

Once, too, a galley had come from the Atlantean Ocean and had been sucked into the strait, said Friede of Schoongaard. There had been people on board — they could be clearly seen — but the ship was swept past at wind-speed, overturned repeatedly, sideways and even lengthwise, and then righted itself again! And still there were men on board, waving up toward the Watch-Rock of the Realm, probably pleading for help. To render aid, of course, had been impossible — the current and the cataract had swept the vessel into the Inland Sea within a few short moments, and from that hour it was never seen again.

Its wreckage, however, had later come drifting by — and even fresh human corpses had been carried past, toward the ocean, because the direction of the torrent had shifted in those days. The king had at first believed it to be the Windbirge, with you aboard, Lord Godda — but there had been too many people on it, and then we realized it must have been a foreign vessel, one that, like us, had long searched across the Atlantic and had finally found the Strait of the Sky-Bearer, only to be dashed to pieces at the very gate of deliverance.

I asked whether that important observation about the whirlpools had been entered into the ship's log — and whether the log had been kept at all thereafter. Lord Gerland replied yes — it had been continued under the king's supervision. He himself had made the short entries by order of Lord Balder, and the young Acora had always helped him, for the boy could write better than the knight.

I turned my head and looked at my son, seated on the right side of the hearth, glowing red in the light, his strong hands resting on the cross-hilt of his sword. I nodded to him. Yes, my boy, so you helped the poor helmsman and continued his precious logbook when you were scarcely ten years old. I taught you your first letters, though it was little you then knew. The lord king must have taken much interest in you, must have taught you himself. — In vain, in vain! Your own father struck you down — on the threshold of life, in the spring of youth.

I noticed Sarota secretly signaling with anger to the man of Tikina. The old one clearly thought it better to speak as little as possible of Godda Acora. But I said — for I had guessed his meaning — that it was a joy to me to hear anything at all about the heir to the throne. That he had been my child, I did not say. Loyalty endures beyond death, and he who has sworn silence takes the secret to the grave — unless the stars speak, to whom Godda Apacheta had told everything — almost everything that had moved him upon the earth, joy and sorrow alike.

Whoever, one day, draws it back from the shining band of the Heavenly Road, let him do so and tell of it. Then all will have become legend — Atlantis, Thule, and the heroes of the Northland — and the old Gode himself will be among the stars and can no longer smile at men and their deeds, nor mourn over death and wounds.

And the old man continued his account:

After long and thorough preparations, the king had marched northward along the eastern coast of the Iberian Mark, taking with him the watch stationed upon the Rock of the Sky-Bearer's Strait, for there was nothing left there to guard except shipwrecks and dead men. This journey along the coast northward, according to the inhabitants, had been necessary in order to reach waters of

steadier current, since the swell from the whirlpools reached far into the Inland Sea.

They had departed with eighty swordsmen and two hundred women and children, but along the coast they had not found what they sought — namely, seaworthy galleys in sufficient number to carry their small folk to Etruria, and thence onward to the Triangle Island. For that reason, they had been forced to remain there for three years in order to build such ships themselves. Progress had been slow, for several essential tools and devices — left behind on the king's galley — were now sorely missed. With difficulty they had managed to obtain what was necessary from the local inhabitants, and it had not been easy to lay down seaworthy galleys with such simple implements. Yet the king had accomplished it by his iron will — he had even found a way to do without copper nails, having the fastenings carved from hard wood instead.

Thus they had not sailed for Etruria until the seventh year after their landing in the Iberian Mark, with sails woven from rush-mats; of thirteen galleys, they lost one — it had drifted southwestward and was never seen again. It was presumed to have been drawn by the great maelstrom toward the Strait of the Sky-Bearer and there gone down, with the women and children aboard.

Since the king had been warned by the Etrurian inhabitants about the smaller whirlpools near the narrow strait between the Triangle Island and Etruria, he had resolved to circle the island from the west by coastal sailing. This had succeeded, and the lord then sought a landing place. In many parts of the coast, however, the glowing lava of the fire-mountain had flowed into the sea, so that the shore was everywhere shrouded in steam and smoke, and Lord Balder had not dared to approach.

But at the southeastern tip he had found clear ground: there the fire-mountain had not sent its molten streams into the sea, and thus the king, with the twelve galleys that remained to him, had been able to beach them on the sand. The region was fertile and rich, though small in habitable extent. It lay in a deeply cut valley, so that the ash-rains from the fire-mountain mostly blew past it; and what ash did fall was washed away by rain and little rivers, leaving space and sustenance for a small company. The daily earthquakes on that great island were severe, but some Atlantean inhabitants whom they found already living there had assured them that this part of the island was safe.

The king had then caused a stone fortress to be built, with underground dwellings made from fitted stone slabs for the watchmen and their families, and there he had stationed the scout watch that had been promised to me. The subterranean dwellings had been made as protection against the tremors of the earth. This had taken place in the tenth year after their landing.

"Where is the scout watch now?" I asked.

The men looked at one another uneasily; they seemed to have feared this question. Sarota did not answer, but the knight Gerland of Tikina did. He said that later it had no longer been possible to recall the watch, and it was presumed to be still there. It had been in greater safety than they themselves afterward were. He begged me not to think ill of them. Lord Sarota, he said, would tell me how all had come to pass.

I replied that I had no cause to think poorly of my friends. The dead king and the slain duchess reminded us not to judge more harshly than loyalty and honor permit. Lord Sarota, therefore, should continue his story.

"In the twelfth year after the landing, we departed the Triangle Island with eleven galleys," the old man reported. "In the long run, there would have been no room for all of us in that narrow valley. The Atlanteans who already lived on the island said that battles were being fought in southern Hellas, around Mycenae and Tiryns—according to a ship's captain who had arrived the year before last—by several groups who were all at feud with one another. There were also Atlanteans there from the old Nile Province of the realm, who evidently sought to establish a firm foothold in Hellas. Among them, only the leaders were of northern blood—and even they, in part, were already of mixed descent. The rank-and-file warriors, however, were brown-skinned.

"There were not many of them, and if our lord king wished to sail there, it would not be impossible to conquer one or even two cities of the ancient culture and to establish a lasting dominion. The region around Mycenae, though mountainous, had fertile valleys; vines, wheat, and field crops were still grown there. The wild game was abundant, thanks to the forests and caves, and the marauding tribes had no good weapons left to hunt more than what was needed to stave off hunger. The king, with his well-armed men, would easily take the cities — which from ancient times had been Atlantean colonies.

"So we sailed our galleys into the long channel that separates the southern peninsula from middle Hellas. The Atlanteans of the Triangle Island had spoken truly: within a few moons the king had conquered Mycenae and the surrounding land, and began to build a fortress from the ruins of the old settlement."

When Sarota had spoken this far, I saw my companions lower their heads.

"That was at the beginning of the thirteenth year," I said. — How near I had been to the goal then, and yet I had curbed my impatience, desiring to lead to Hellas a people strong in battle.

I motioned with my hand for Sarota to continue.

"In the high summer of that thirteenth year," the old man said, "Nile-Atlanteans landed on the east coast of southern Hellas — fifty galleys of them, packed full of brown and black warriors. Their command, however, was in the hands of Atlanteans, who maintained an iron discipline over the colored soldiers. At first, the king had hoped the Nile-Atlanteans would recognize the high kingship of the realm, and he sent Lord Ragner of Murnaat to them to negotiate. But they sent the knight back with the message that they had long since grown weary of the dominion of the realm — even before the cataclysm of the Earth — just as the Hellenes themselves had rebelled earlier against the king. It was their good right, they said, to build a realm of their own; that was why they had come — not to fall again, willingly, under the overlordship of a kingdom that no longer existed.

"They therefore demanded that the king vacate the city of Mycenae within three times twenty-four hours, since it was a city of the Nile Province and had already, in the previous year, been occupied once by a garrison from Abyssia. Otherwise, their leader would take the city by force of arms."

My old shipmates looked down awkwardly at their fists. The memory of what came next seemed dreadful to them.

"The king, of course, refused to surrender the city," Sarota went on, his voice hoarse. "The war-host of the Nile Province then attacked — not after three times twenty-four hours, but only after several weeks — and since their galleys were crammed with colored soldiery to the very planks of the deck, the enemy could hurl new forces day after day against the unfinished defenses of Mycenae."

The narrator fell silent, and stillness filled the hall. The flame crackled on the hearth, and the wind hissed through the owl-hole high in the gable. I saw before me the desperate struggle of the last Atlanteans from Aztlan, and I tormented myself with the thought — why had I never once acted rashly, marched swiftly to Hellas? I knew well that I had done rightly, holding my now-multiplied people together with a grip of bronze — yet still the wind whispered of lost chances, and of my guilt in the death of King Balder.

Was it not I, too, who had slain the young lord — who now lay beside my hearth, resting from his brief and valiant life?

Lord Sarota went on, and he kept it brief.

He said that Lord Framer of Akapana had been among the first to fall; then Lord Ragner of Murnaat had been struck down; Lord Wilfried of Antiayu had had an arrow pierce his shield; Liebe of Aargund had fallen from the battlement and been dashed on the ditch; and thirty Atlanteans whom Lord

Balder had levied from Iberia, Etruria, and Hellas had fallen in battle. Then the king ordered a retreat to the north. That was achieved, but the king fell in the fighting during the withdrawal. The war-host from the Nile Province pursued them because they had feared the king's men might return, and they carried off nearly all the women and the whole baggage train. In northern Hellas the remnants of the small king's people proclaimed Lord Godda Acora king, and then they crossed the passes to seek Lord Apacheta, of whom rumor ran that he sat with a mighty host at the Danube and was on his way south to seek the king. And Lord Godda Apacheta, they said, was a commander unlike any other in the Northland. He had fought only to victory so far, and no one could overcome him, for he came from the stars and possessed supernatural knowledge. He had but one eye, and ravens sat upon his shoulder when he held council in the hall. The young king said to us: "Whoever finds the wild Gode shall lower his sword. My poor helmsman is easy to recognize by his missing eye."

Almost all the men who sat at the long table in my hall and listened to Lord Sarota telling what they themselves had endured propped their wiry, angular heads in their fists and hid their faces — and I suspect that one or another of them wept in secret, or at least felt the urge to do so. Tears are rare in a hard age, but I know the northern souls: they are as tender as the down of the singing-swans that flew to Thule, and their grief turns inward, for there is nothing more delicate in men than shame.

So Godda Apacheta sat long with his friends in the hall of his winter camp, close to the borderland of Hellas, and was finally — after half a generation — reunited with those who had gone with him from Aztlan to seek Thule.

The next day I ordered Lord Gerdung to assemble several scouting parties and occupy the saddles of the mountain passes. I intended to strike into Hellas before winter fully set in, to free the Atlantean women and children from the hands of the colored auxiliaries of the Nile-Atlanteans in Mycenae. It must be done very quickly, and surprise would succeed because the conquerors in Mycenae would not expect an incursion from the north at that season. I had seen, however, that under the southern sun winter's severity was not much greater than the summer months at the ice border. I could not in conscience leave our friends longer than necessary in captivity. I was resolved to punish the Atlantean leaders in Mycenae if they had failed to protect the northern women from the coloreds. Besides, I had the duty to fetch as soon as possible the watch-group on the Triangle Island. All this required departure within a few days. We must show that we could cross a mountain in winter, and the sooner it was done the better.

I laid Frau Katte and my son, the king, on the pyre and gave them to the flames to prevent the destruction of the graves they would have left behind. I carried the urns with me to inter them by the grave of King Balder at Mycenae.

Again the dogs were harnessed to the sledges, as we had so advantageously practiced in the regions of the ice border, and the animals barked with joy that they might drag the vehicles at roaring speed over the snowcap of the mountains. Godda's wild host set out for Hellas at the beginning of winter. Where we came, the wandering hordes lay in their winter lairs and dared not come out for fear. The garrisons of the mountain-passes let no messenger into Hellas and none out. I had ordered that our advance remain secret. Since the roads were secured by our scouts, I could also march by night, and the valleys and gorges of the winter mountains rang with the barking of dogs and the snorting of the steeds of the wild host.

Like a storm-wind Godda Apacheta burst into Hellas, and it mattered little to him that the baggage train could not keep pace for long stretches — for I now had enough warriors with me to cover him, faithful and diligent, obedient and full of passionate devotion to the old one-eyed Gode, whose personal suffering had become theirs as well.

I willingly admit we had luck. Winter delayed long and only struck in full force after we had already crossed the mountains. Now there was snow even in Hellas, but the cold was no burden to my hardened and well-provisioned host in those southern lands.

Whoever lay by the road scattered in terror — for an armed host of over three hundred riders and four hundred foot soldiers had not been seen in Hellas since the downfall of the realm.

But fearing that despite the paralyzing winter cold, secret messengers might carry word of my approach to Mycenae, I sent the cavalry squadrons ahead under the command of the one-armed Lord Gerdung, to seize the harbors of the southern peninsula of Hellas. I wished to prevent the Nile-Atlanteans, with their colored soldiery and their captives, from taking to their ships to escape vengeance. I gave Lord Gerdung no further orders, but full authority to act according to whatever circumstances he might find in southern Hellas.

And Lord Gerdung acted. His old Gode, like all old gods, no longer needed to do much himself. Before winter's end, I entered Mycenae with the train of the wild host. The conquerors became captives, and the captives awoke to the noise of battle in the night and, at daybreak, saw that they were free — and that their men and fathers stood among the liberators, those who had once been forced to abandon the city under hopeless circumstances.

The Atlantean leaders, some of whom were seized straight from their sleeping mats, could offer little resistance; and thanks to Lord Gerdung's skilled command, not a single man was lost in the taking of the royal city of Mycenae. The colored auxiliaries of the Nile-Atlanteans were scattered across the

countryside and not concentrated, so that dealing with them amounted merely to a longer operation of disarmament, which Lord Gurtur Ase Sarland of Orlin carried out with great skill. In the harbors, ninety seaworthy galleys fell into my hands — and at one stroke I possessed a fleet as well.

My fifteen years of ruthless labor in forging and hardening my northern people had borne fruit. Gode's wild host — the Hyperboreans, as the people of Hellas called us for our northern origin — were now lords of southern Hellas.

I rejoiced that the Atlantean commanders of the Nile-men had treated the captive women of their own blood with honor; therefore I had no need to proceed against them. Yet they remained prisoners in my power, for they had renounced their oath of fealty to the King of Atlantis. Their conduct had made it impossible to re-establish order in the Mediterranean lands under the leadership of the rightful royal house. They were also guilty of the death of King Balder. But taking into account the world-spanning catastrophe of the realm and the confusion it had caused in many minds, I held these men in chivalric captivity and promised to release them after some years. I did not intend to keep them permanently; one who has once been unfaithful may be so again.

Later, they remained — but under lesser rights. They feared being accused before the Nile Province, so I consented that they might settle around Mycenae under my suzerainty and earn their livelihood as farmers. I also decreed that their children should enjoy full rights.

The colored peoples I retained as slaves, for I needed laborers to found the first strong state in Hellas after the fall of the realm. Naturally, they remained forever of inferior status, counted only as subjects of the newly founded kingdom. Even they refused to sail back to the Nile Province, as I had offered them.

A year later, the watch-group from the Triangle Island also arrived at Mycenae. Sarota had begged leave to fetch these men, and I granted him six galleys, each manned by fifteen seasoned seamen — among them the old shipmaster Wulf Quaden, whom I had taken into my folk's confederation in northern Teutenland at the rubble ridge of the northern glacier.

And when the sixteenth year since the departure of the Windbirge had passed, the walls of the royal city of Mycenae were already rising from the ruins. I had the ambition to build my houses and fortresses in true Atlantean style — yet that ambition was not fully realized. I did have a band of capable builders, but the tools for working stone were insufficient, and so I had to content myself with mortarless masonry reminiscent of the perfected architecture of Atlantis, though far from equaling it.

Culture must be earned — and that is accomplished only through many generations of men, not through the will of a star-wise man who merely remembers a sunken age.

Among the prisoners I had taken in Mycenae was a scholar from the Nile, a man from Abyssia—a mixed breed, such as are found there in great number. He was a clever and learned man, and he was able to tell me what had become of my ship's logbook, which, together with the treasure, had fallen into the hands of the Nile-Atlanteans. The Abyssian sat with me in my tent and was treated as a free man, as all true scholars are before God, and he reported that my logbook had been found among the spoils of King Balder, placed in a place of honor among his belongings. It had been taken to the Nile Province by a priest, for it was said to be of immense importance.

For though it had not always been easy to discern from my brief notations what I had meant, it had nonetheless revealed, in broad outline, how the downfall of the Realm had occurred—especially explaining the causes of the floods and volcanic eruptions in the equatorial regions, and the impossibility of navigation on the Atlantean Ocean in the present age.

I asked the man what he meant by this. The entries, after all, had been clear enough, even considering that many were written only in shorthand form.

The scholar replied that his friend, the one who had taken the logbook to the Nile Province, was a historian who had written a short summary describing the fate of the realm. Before knowledge of my logbook, he said, the entire matter had been quite obscure. He had fortunately kept a copy of his friend's historical account and was willing, if I wished, to fetch it.

Of course, I said yes with great pleasure, and he brought it to me that same day — a short text of only a few sheets of Nile papyrus, titled:

"Report on the Downfall of the Realm of Atlantis."

I remarked, even before reading it, that it seemed very short. The scholar replied that this was true, but that it was meant merely as a summary contribution derived from my logbook. His friend intended to compile a larger work later, from other sources as well, which would be preserved in many copies in the libraries of the Nile Province, so that the memory of Atlantis and its downfall would not be lost in the warlike ages to come.

Then I read the text[7]:

Report on the Downfall of the Realm of Atlantis

[7] This report was later recorded by Plato in his dialogues Timaeus and Critias. The translation used here is that of Otto Apelt, Philosophical Library, Vol. 179, Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag.

"Many times and in many ways have men perished, and they will perish again — most often by fire and water. For what is told of Phaëthon, the son of the Sun — how he once took his father's chariot and, not knowing how to follow the path of his father, burned all that was upon the earth and was himself struck down by lightning — this, though it sounds like a fable, holds a kernel of truth: namely, the changing of the heavenly bodies that circle the earth, and the periodic destruction of all things earthly by a great fire.

Among all the great deeds of the Hellenic state, one surpasses all others in magnitude and heroism. Our records tell of a mighty power that once was checked and destroyed by the Hellenic state — a warlike host that came forth arrogantly from the Atlantean Sea, waging war against all Europe and Asia. For in those days, the sea there was still navigable.

Before the Pillars of the Sky-Bearer there lay an island, larger than Asia and Libya combined. From it one could pass to other islands, and from the islands to the opposite continent, which encircled that sea truly so-called. For all that lies within the mentioned straits appears but as a gulf with a narrow mouth; but that outer sea is rightly called Ocean, and the land bordering it deserves the name Mainland.

On this island Atlantis there arose a great and admirable kingdom which ruled over the entire island, many of the neighboring isles, and parts of the mainland. Its power extended over Libya as far as the Nile, and in Europe as far as Tyrrhenia.

Once this realm undertook to subjugate, with its combined forces, all Hellas and indeed all lands within the straits in a single blow. Then the might of the Hellenic state revealed itself in all its glory and strength before all men. First among all peoples in courage and skill of war, it led the Hellenes; but later, deserted by its allies, it was compelled to rely upon its own strength, and, despite utmost peril, overcame the advancing Atlantean foe and raised its trophies of victory. Thus it prevented the enslavement of those not yet subdued, and became the noble liberator within the Gates of the Sky-Bearer.

Later, great earthquakes and floods arose, and in the course of a single terrible day and night the warlike race of the Hellenes sank in masses beneath the earth, and likewise the island of Atlantis disappeared into the sea.

Therefore, the sea there can no longer be navigated or explored, for masses of thick mud, left by the sinking of the island, have made it impassable. The island, greater than Asia and Libya combined, was swallowed by the sea in an earthquake, leaving behind a vast shoal of impenetrable slime which prevents all who attempt the voyage from reaching the outer ocean."

I laid the pages down and gazed thoughtfully before me. Much of what was written there was correct—but much else was utterly wrong, or at least misleading! I regretted that we were at war with the Nile-Atlanteans, for now it would be impossible for a long time to correct these scientific errors. What distortions would later arise through repeated copying was easy enough to imagine.

I told the Abyssian that I was rather shaken by such a report, especially since clear source material had existed. The scholar, however, maintained that his friend had adhered very closely to the logbook and could not see why the text should be in part false or misleading. That I, as an Atlantean, disagreed with the praise of the Hellenes—who were, in my view, of course rebels—ought not, he thought, to trouble a wise man.

I smiled at such childlike reasoning and tried to explain what I found objectionable in the text. For example, it stated at the very beginning that the floods and volcanic eruptions of greatest and world-destroying magnitude—like those which had accompanied the fall of the realm—had arisen from changes in the heavenly bodies encircling the Earth. That, I said, was both right and wrong. It was true that such a catastrophe had indeed come about through an alteration in an orbital path, but it had not been caused by a star that circled the Earth. That was merely the impression made upon all men ignorant of astronomy, who think that every star revolves around the Earth.

In reality, it had been a wandering star—the very body which is today the Moon of the Earth. In earlier times, however, it had not orbited the Earth, but moved in an approximately similar orbit around the Sun. And it was the capture of this wandering star by the Earth's gravity that produced the change in its course: from then on, it no longer circled only the Sun, but was forced to orbit the Earth as a slave-star. I asked whether the scholar now understood that this part of the report was entirely misleading. I, in any case, had never written such a thing in my ship's logbook.

His answer was not entirely convincing, though he claimed to have understood me. I could not, however, expect him to grasp fully what I meant, since he possessed no knowledge of the stars and could form no proper conception of the courses of the wandering and slave stars.

After a pause, the scholar said that everything else written must at least be correct. The rest, he said, had nothing to do with the motion of the stars and had been clearly drawn from my notes. I conceded that the description of the catastrophe was, on the whole, accurate: that on a dreadful day and night in Hellas, whole stretches of land had sunk beneath the earth along with their people, and that at the same time Atlantis had vanished beneath the waves of the sea. The text also expressed well that the disaster had been world-spanning, occurring simultaneously in widely separated regions of the Earth.

But then, I said, came a delightful passage—also taken from my logbook, but turned into utter nonsense in the way it was rendered. It said that since the time of the downfall of Atlantis, the sea there could no longer be navigated, because dense mud made sailing impossible. According to the author, this mud consisted of earth and silt washed away during the destruction of the islands, which from that time onward floated upon the ocean and blocked all ships.

"No," I said, "such quantities of earth would simply sink to the sea floor; they would not form banks of mud that could hinder a good galley."

The scholar insisted that his friend had followed the ship's log word for word, and that I myself—old Godda Apacheta—had written it. They had, he said, been greatly puzzled when they read that passage and had long debated how I could have come to make such an incredible claim. They had even asked captured Atlanteans, and these had testified that if the star-wise Godda Apacheta had written it thus in his log, then it must certainly be true, for I had been one of the most reliable scholars of the old realm. Consequently, his friend—though reluctantly—had included the account of the drifting masses of dense mud in his report.

He now asked me, as a fellow scholar, whether I could still uphold my statement, now that I was speaking with him, a collaborator on that Atlantis report.

I could not suppress a smile and replied that yes, I could and would stand by it—but that the "mud" spoken of in the Atlantis report was not earthly mud, but mud of ice.

The scholar, however, shook his head and replied that mud made of ice—that is, slush or ice-mud—could not possibly exist upon the Atlantean Ocean. It must, he said, be a joking excuse that I had invented. I assured him again that it had truly been unimaginable masses of ice-sludge which I had encountered north of the height of the Sky-Bearer, and that this icy mud had the peculiar property of floating upon the water, something ordinary soil could never do.

At first he refused to believe my insistence that these were drifting fields of frozen slush, but suddenly he remembered having read in my logbook a word which had earlier puzzled him—connected to my use of the term mud—and that word, he said, must have been ice. He now admitted the possibility that this had indeed stood there, but he continued to doubt that such floating ice-fields could exist at all.

My attempts to convince the scholar—who in all his life had seen, at most, a little snow on the mountains of Hellas—that an entire sea might freeze solid as far as the pole were fruitless. Yet he remained very polite, as scholars always do when they disbelieve something, and assured me that he had somewhat understood me. I cannot imagine, however, that he later made any effort in his homeland to correct the misleading portions of the Atlantis report.

I could not change it. But I thought how quickly ignorance and lack of knowledge, in an age that has fallen out of joint, can distort a clear and reasonable account of real conditions—and that I could hardly blame the scholars of future centuries or millennia if they were to regard such reports as children's fables.

For my part, I intended to do what I could to re-establish friendly relations with the Nile-Atlanteans; for the works of science must not be neglected if culture is to survive. But that did not depend upon me alone and my willingness for peace; it lay far more with those unknown rulers of the Nile Province, and with their readiness to accept my settlement in Hellas as a fact. I sat in Mycenae by the right that only the sword's point can bestow, and the men of the Nile could show no better right themselves.

Lord Gerdung wished that I should take the royal crown of Mycenae. I was not unwilling—not because the old Gode had suddenly grown proud or ambitious, but so that I might stand before my adversaries upon the Middle Sea as a northern king, whether in war or negotiation.

So I ordered my men to assemble on the day of the summer solstice, upon the marketplace of Mycenae, which could just hold the seven hundred warriors who were to be present. At the same time I intended to swear in the watchmen from the Triangle Island whom Sarota had brought back.

My three eldest sons were old enough to take part in the ceremony; the two youngest were still under the care of Lady Ragild, who had taken them in as her own children since Katte Hogger had fallen. From my ducal tent I could see the armored companies of my men clanking from the streets of the rebuilt city, forming up upon the square in a wide, gleaming rectangle. Their faces were solemn and grave—as well they might be, for in their hearts they felt what I knew: the old Gode was to them like a victorious war-god in whom they placed blind faith.

I smiled as I watched them come—perhaps a little painfully—for though surrounded, I was still very much alone. Katte Hogger could no longer see this day, and I would rather have been able to bow before my slain son Godda than to receive homage myself. For I was a star-wise man, a scholar, not a king. Yet the fallen age had changed me as well. Atlantis was gone forever, even for me. Lord Gerdung of Gaardepoort had been right when he spoke those words over my son's body.

Now the captains of the companies climbed the steps to my tent. Lord Gerdung led them; beside him walked the young knight Lutbrand, who bore the crown. The goldsmith Phortas had forged it from plundered gold—fitting enough for the plundering old Gode! Behind them came all the faithful ones whom sword and storm had left me: Luhre and Sarota, the lords of Orlin, Vaage and Galeta, Fokke Paliso, Gurtur Sasborg, the old Quaden, Gerland of Tikina, Friede of Schoongaard, Rabe of Guttenberg, Wittewehr of Tambilo, Droger of Siminak, the old Bilrung of Kalasia, Henneke of Gaatland, Wehle of Brammerloh, and Geyer of Antianyu, who had led the watch on the Triangle Island.

No—I was not alone. It would have been ungrateful to say so. Who else upon this uncertain earth possessed such friends as I did? When one grows old, one grows lonely in any case, for the young turn from the old. But I possessed the love and trust of a small people—which, under these conditions, was already a great one—and by my will it was to grow greater still. It was already mighty, compared to the scattered tribes that wandered through the plains of Hellas up to the Ice-Rim. We were a strong, united host of northern swans, swans of Thule, who had lost their homeland and sought a new one upon the edge of the glaciers—until the old land should, after millennia, be free again.

And it will be free again! I know too well the nature and the orbits of the wandering stars and their companions. I have learned and seen it upon other worlds. All companions strive toward the rounding of their orbit about their lordly star. Even the Moon, after thousands of years, will no longer circle the Earth in its stretched, oval path, as it does now in the short time since its capture. Its orbit will draw ever nearer to a circle; then its perigee and apogee will differ little, and when that day comes, the ice will recede, the drifting on the Atlantean Sea will cease, and Scylla and Charybdis will no longer terrify mankind. Yes—Thule will be free again, and our race will follow the retreat of the ice, steadfast and faithful as the swans that each year fly northward to see whether the ice still stands fast.

I wore no helmet when I stepped from my tent. The wound my son had struck into my old skull was deep and grievous, and still not fully healed. But the circlet I was to wear that day did not press upon it; it would not hurt me when I placed it with my own hands upon my white hair. Since Lady Katte had

fallen, I had let my white beard grow again, flowing from my chin as it once had aboard the royal galley. No gemstone gleamed any longer in my empty eye-socket—Godda Apacheta had no woman left for whom to make himself handsome.

As I stood before the tent and waited for my friends, as they came slowly up the steps to me with solemn tread—for it must indeed be solemn when an old king adorned himself with the crown—then the two ravens flew after me and alighted upon my shoulders. I was surprised, but let them stay, for I would not drive them off under my men's eyes. They would only have returned at once.

My three eldest sons stood beside me, and the youngest nudged me.

"Father, the ravens! The people will laugh at us!"

I looked at the boy and smiled faintly at his anxious little face. He feared for the dignity of the old Gode.

But the people did not laugh. A rustling passed through the ranks of bronze; the long spears sank of their own accord, and the tattered banner of the Realm bowed low.

I looked up to the sky, thinking that now the swans would pass above me, as they so often had. But the sky was empty and of a splendid blue. How moving it would have been if the singing swans had flown just then!

Godda Apacheta is a mocking bird—make no mistake.
He will never change.

But this, I whisper secretly to the stars—and they may tell it to my ancient friend in the heavens:

There is something like gratitude in my heart.

End.

Wittekind

A Tragedy in Four Acts

Characters:

Wittekind — Duke of the Saxons
Albion — Duke of Verden
Manfried — Apostle of the Goths
Helge — his daughter
Ordino — Apostle of the Danes
Desiderius — Papal Chamberlain in Cologne
Isidorus — Papal Nuncio to Charles of the Franks
Alcuin — Rector of York, Adviser to Charles of the Franks
Gerbold — Saxon leader
Folker — young farmer of Wittekind's clan
Envoy of Denmark
A scribe of Wittekind
Gothic and Frankish officers, captains, and soldiers
Charles — King of the Franks

The action takes place in the last third of the eighth century after our reckoning:

the first act in Wesel,
the second in a field camp on the Weser,
the third in the prisoner camp at Verden,
and the fourth at Wittekind's fortress on the Ruhr.

First Act

Hall in Manfried's house near Wesel on the Rhine.

First Scene

Desiderius, Manfried, Alkuin, Ordino, Isidorus.
They are all sitting at the table.
Night. Candlelight.

Alkuin: As far as I am informed of my royal lord's intentions, he does not wish to become embroiled in a quarrel with the Saxons over such trifles. What Wittekind has written to the king is dignified and proper. I doubt the king would be inclined to reply in an unfriendly tone. The Holy Father in Rome, it seems to me, does not fully recognize the difficulties we face here along the Lippe and the Weser.

(Some of the clerics smile faintly.)

Desiderius: Nevertheless, I would be grateful to you, Brother Alkuin, if you would do your part to ensure that the king's zeal does not cool. The service of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is a struggle. He tolerates no lukewarm waiting. His Holiness in Rome knows very well that the zeal of our apostles and monks has made the harvest ripe for the reaping.

Manfried: Ripe to the point of bursting, Lord Alkuin! I have known this stubborn people since my earliest youth—indeed, I myself am Saxon by blood. These men cannot be won over with gentleness. They will not heed the words of love that the Lord grants to the penitent sinner; therefore, the sword must complete the conversion—the sword that Jesus brought us, as the Evangelist Mark says. We have sown the seed of the Lord so broadly that brother delivers brother unto death, and father the son; and that the children rise up against their parents and help them to die—exactly as it is written in the words of the Holy Gospel.

Alkuin: Then perhaps Wittekind is not entirely wrong in his complaint to the king. He accuses your monks of sowing discord among the clans of the Saxons and of teaching the youth to despise their mothers and betray their fathers for the sake of the Christian faith.

Manfried: Even Jesus despised his mother! Even Jesus let his mother and brothers wait outside the door and did not invite them into his house when they wished to speak with him. The Lord and Savior knew neither father nor mother. He did not acknowledge the brothers born of his mother. His brothers

were the Jews and heathens throughout the world who let themselves be baptized. But his own by blood—those who remain in darkness—are his enemies. And for them too the word holds true: not peace was brought to them, but the sword.

Desiderius: Behold, Lord Alkuin—the Apostle of the Lord!

Isidorus: In this circle, it is not necessary to cite passages from the Gospels to prove the righteousness of our cause. What matters here is solely the power of the Church and the growth of her glory.

Alkuin: You forget the interest of the king, Lord Nuncio.

Isidorus: Charles's interest is that of the Church. Charles is the sword of the Church. When it slays the heathens, it advances the wealth and prosperity of both—the empire and the Church alike. We are here for the sake of spreading the salvific doctrine of the Holy Church—nothing else. Remember, it is essential that we succeed in placing all the blame upon Wittekind. Only then will Charles's zeal flare up like a torch. Wittekind, however, is but a stubborn, foolish German...

Alkuin: Lord Nuncio! It may be that in Rome they still regard us Germans with the eyes of a Marius—full of fear and hatred. To speak such words here on the Rhine leads only to needless misunderstandings between Romans and Germans. We are sensitive along the Rhine. Since I myself come from York in England, I run no danger of speaking pro domo.

Isidorus: Thank you for the lesson. Wittekind's letter to the king gives us much to think about.

Desiderius: Indeed, Lord Nuncio! Behind the calm and measured words of the heathen there lurks, in the fog of his obscure mind, a threatening hand upon the sword.

Alkuin: Perhaps he was an apt pupil of the Visigoths. But no matter—if that is so, is the king then right to wait?

Isidorus: I shall answer you later, dear Rector of York. I spoke of the need to make all guilt fall upon Wittekind. How necessary it is to bring about a decision in this sense, the Apostle Ordino will now report.

Ordino: It is little and yet much that I learned in Denmark. King Siegfried had me, to my surprise, arrested this past spring and brought to Ulfsen. My fellow apostles he dismissed without giving any reason, sending them across the border. Later I learned from loyal followers of my mission that Saxon riders had been guests at the Danish royal court. Wittekind himself was said to have

been among them! And the betrothal of Princess Geva to the young Dane Lundborg was suddenly annulled.

Alkuin (uneasy): Does the king know this?

Ordino (uncertain): I believe not, Lord Rector.

Alkuin (restrained): Lord Nuncio Isidorus?

Isidorus (smiling): So far as I am informed of the king's intentions, he does not wish to become entangled in disputes with the Danes over such trifles.

Desiderius: Wait! My beloved brothers in Christ! I beg that no ill feeling arise. That Charles did not learn every detail of the events at Siegfried's court happened with my consent and that of the Nuncio. When, however, King Carolus sent to the venerable bishop of Cologne and to the Nuncio of His Holiness a copy of Wittekind's letter, I myself believed, in agreement with the Holy See, that I should address a letter to Lord Wittekind. In it, I hinted that the expulsion of the worthy Apostle Ordino from Denmark was, according to certain reports, attributed to the Duke's influence, and that I requested restraint from further unfriendly measures against the servants of the Holy Church—unless, of course, unfortunate consequences should arise, which would then fall entirely upon the head of Duke Wittekind.

Alkuin: And yet this course of action is inexcusable, venerable sirs! A timely warning from Charles to King Siegfried would have made the Dane more cautious—especially toward Wittekind. I have the feeling that these matters concern questions of statecraft which are reserved for Lord Charles himself, not for the Church, which in such affairs should act only as adviser. The king is in Italy and may rightly expect that during his absence nothing will occur which could bring him into grave distress. At least this much is clear to me: I must inform the provincial commander in Cologne to have the weapons and supply depots from Wesel and Haltern moved back across the Rhine. And since I know that our militant brother Manfried also maintains such a depot here on his estate, I must likewise ask that it be removed. We must not imagine that Wittekind is an unsuspecting fool.

Desiderius: The welfare of the Church required this step, Lord Rector.

Alkuin: I serve the king, Lord Chamberlain.

Desiderius: First and foremost, dear brother, you serve the Holy Church, whose consecrated servant you are. The Church is catholic, not tribal. The temporal lords of this world are her instruments. Their sword strikes blindly in the direction which the Church desires—for the sake of Jesus. Only great peril can drive Charles to great deeds.

Alkuin: You men of Rome do not think of the German blood that will be shed in vain for such things.

Desiderius: Great aims demand great sacrifices.

Isidorus: Then it was right that we waited. With that I have answered your earlier question, Lord Rector of York.

Alkuin: The circumstances have changed! Brother Manfried, please summon my boatmen—I must at once return to Cologne.

Manfried (rings a table bell).

Second Scene

The same. Helge enters.

Manfried: Child, have the Rector's galley made ready, and bring us all a light meal with wine.

(Helge glances through the open window and exits.)

Alkuin: I am sorry that the young maiden must lose the sleep of youth on our account.

Manfried: Helge serves the Lord Jesus gladly, as I do.

Alkuin: And has she forgotten Wittekind?

Manfried: Wittekind has avoided my house ever since he was chosen Duke of the Heathens.

Isidorus: In any case, I do not consider it desirable that this man should confess himself to Christ before the will and strength of the German people have been broken. Strong, self-willed nations have always been a burden to the Church, and there are always surprises as long as that stubborn, defiant character has not been bent.

Manfried: I concede that the peoples of the Mediterranean became an easier prey for the Lord Jesus. Yet it seems to me that there was not much to admire in their character. I would have gladly welcomed it if Wittekind had taken baptism. Once, I even thought myself at the goal—it was an illusion. From the teaching of the Holy Church this man forged weapons to fight Jesus instead of serving Him. Therefore I see salvation only in the sword, especially since

Wittekind has succeeded in withdrawing even the young Duke Albion from my influence.

Third Scene

The same. Helge enters.

Isidorus: Then Wittekind should simply have been put to death.

Helge (placing the meal on the table): The Rector's galley is being prepared in the boathouse, Father.

Alkuin (rising): Just a piece of bread and a sip of wine, fair child of Manfried's hall.

Helge (quietly, glancing toward Isidorus): Why should Wittekind die, Lord Rector?

Alkuin: Would it grieve you?

Helge (guarded): Am I not a Christian, and the daughter of the Apostle to the Saxons? How could it grieve me if the great enemy of the Holy Church were to die?

Alkuin: I drink to your health, Saxon child.

Helge: I thank you, Lord Rector of England.

Manfried: Are the guests' beds prepared, my girl?

Helge: Yes, Father.

Manfried: Then you may go to sleep. Good night.

(Helge exits.)

Fourth Scene
The same, without Helge.

Manfried: Lord Nuncio, we northern apostles still hope to reach our goal without murder.

Isidorus: Yet you yourself accepted the sword.

Manfried: We Germans make distinctions. Sword and dagger are different weapons.

Isidorus: The question is—which proves more effective?

Alkuin: Sleep well, dear brothers. I have the feeling this night will be more important for us all than we yet realize.

Manfried: I shall accompany you to the boathouse, Brother Alkuin.

Alkuin: Thank you—and do not forget the weapons depot! Otherwise, it might one day happen that the king is fought with his own arms. Good night!

(Manfried and Alkuin exit.)

Fifth Scene

The same, without Manfried and Alkuin.

Isidorus: It seems to me that even the character of the German clergy might benefit from further refinement.

Desiderius (laughs): I drink to your high health, Lord Nuncio! His Holiness has sent a man of zeal to the Rhine, well suited to act as apostle among the forests of the heathens.

Isidorus (irritated): For that, the Pope appoints other men. Nor would the Lord Chamberlain thank you if he were transferred from his comfortable house in Cologne to a log hut on the Elbe.

Ordino: From what I experienced in Denmark, the Lord Nuncio would soon be lying beneath a burial mound.

Isidorus: A martyr of the Holy Church, then!

Desiderius: Quite right, Lord Nuncio. Here—take another piece of cold roast duck. The wine, too, is well kept. It has character! Perhaps because it grew along the Rhine and has not yet been diluted.

(They laugh.)

Isidorus: You live quite well here in Germany.

Desiderius: We gratefully accept what the Lord God provides. So long as the soul is fastened to this devilish body, my dear Lord Nuncio, it would be foolish to let it suffer needlessly for the soul’s sake.

Ordino: Did not the Christ of Nazareth teach otherwise, Lord Chamberlain?

Desiderius: In some matters, yes and no, faithful Apostle of Denmark. Did He not allow His own to pluck ears of grain on the Sabbath?

Ordino: And had not even a place where He might lay His head.

Desiderius: Yet He does not demand this absolutely from His weaker servants. And if we sincerely repent that the wine once tasted too good to us, He has assured us of forgiveness.

Isidorus (laughs).

Ordino (falls silent).

Desiderius (rises and goes to the window): Brother Manfried comes back through the garden. He may as well show us to our sleeping chambers.

(Yawns.)

I am quite tired, and shall make good use of this pleasant lodging at Manfried's estate to sleep long tomorrow morning. Let us hope our dreams are not haunted by Wittekind.

Ordino: He's far away!

Desiderius (finishing his wine): He was said to have been seen in Haltern!

Sixth Scene

The same. Manfried enters.

Manfried: The castellan of Wesel is on his way with his riders. I heard the hoofbeats.

Isidorus: Is there anything particular about it?

Manfried: Scarcely. The market on the Lippe is always a little restless. A few night patrols can do no harm.

Desiderius: Then let us retire, Brother Manfried. After keeping such noble vigil as we have tonight, one may look forward to one's bed.

Manfried: Follow me upstairs, dear brothers.

(He ascends the staircase to the gallery; the others follow.)

Seventh Scene

The stage is at first empty. Then Helge enters, carrying an oil lamp, which she sets on the window ledge. Her movements are careful and wary. She takes two swords from the wall and lets them slide quietly down into the garden.

Helge. Wittekind.

Wittekind (in a monk's robe and hood, enters slowly and cautiously through the open gate of the hall; he notices Helge's movement and stops): Peace be with you, my daughter.

Helge (gives a faint cry, turns around quickly, and extinguishes the lamp with her hand): What do you want, stranger monk? It is night.

Wittekind: A kindly light burned in the hall window, as though calling the wandering stranger. Long I stood by the hedge. The dogs did not bark, as though the strange monk were their friend; and the watchman at the gate let me in without asking who I was—as if I were expected! Yes, it even seemed to me that my coming was welcome.

Helge: I locked up the dogs. They make such noise, and Father's house is full of learned clerical guests whose rest must not be disturbed.

Wittekind: I know it, my daughter. The Chamberlain and the Nuncio of the Roman See are at Manfried's hall, and Lord Alkuin, the Rector from England, is here as well.

Helge: Come back tomorrow, when it is day.

Wittekind: May I not wait in the hall? The night is cold, and I have journeyed far. Tomorrow I shall not meet the lords again.

Helge: Yes, yes, venerable brother—the lords held a meeting that lasted deep into the night. They were very weary and will sleep well into the day. I beg you, go. Do you not see that I am alone?

Wittekind: Then wake one of the servants. Is such a request unjust?

Helge (troubled): Of course not—but I may not disturb the priests with any noise at night. (She glances toward the window.) I fear—they would be frightened.

Wittekind: They need fear only one man, and that man is Wittekind of the Eresburg.

Helge (looks anxiously again toward the window): I told you already, brother monk—it cannot be done! Are you perhaps one of Father's missionaries from Haltern? (Again she glances toward the window.)

Wittekind: No, my daughter. I see your unrest. Is it perhaps that you await another—someone dear to your heart?

Helge: No—yes... I beg you, go.

Wittekind (steps slowly closer): May I not take the place of the one you await—if only for a little while?

Helge: Do not come near me! Beware!

Wittekind: Then call for help, fair child! There on the table stands a bell—strike it, that the house may awaken and drive the importunate monk from its threshold. Take the hammer from the board and strike your father's brazen shield, so the clang will echo to Wesel. Well? Dare you not call for help, Manfried's lovely daughter? Or are you perhaps waiting for Wittekind—the god-forsaken peasant duke of the Ruhr?

Helge (clasps her hands in bitter torment).

Wittekind (steps close to her; Helge retreats toward the window, and he follows).

Helge (suddenly strikes at him with a dagger; Wittekind seizes her wrist. She sinks to her knees.)

Wittekind (quietly, intently): Now call for help!

Helge (forced to drop the dagger, tears at his robe with her free hand; Wittekind laughs softly, throws back his hood; the struggle stops abruptly).

Wittekind (draws Helge up into his arms, holding her head between his hands).

Helge (deeply moved): Wittekind...

Wittekind (touched): You know me again at last, Helge? And greet me with a dagger-thrust!

Helge (throwing her arms around his neck): How could you torment me so terribly?

Wittekind: Do you not know that we German heathens are sons of the Devil? It's in us all—to torment for the sheer joy of tormenting. And now you'd kill me instead—with those beautiful arms of yours, Manfried's daughter! I almost think I should ring the bell myself to call for help—the enemy has entered your father's house!

Helge: The enemy?—That, at least, has the Christ of Nazareth achieved: that I have learned to hate both father and father's house!

Wittekind: And whom do you love?

Helge: The one who forgot me.

Wittekind: The one who carried you in his arms when you were still a young maiden.

Helge: The one who is betrothed to Lady Geva of Denmark!

Wittekind: And what might that man's name be?

Helge: Wittekind—Wittekind—Wittekind! (Clings to his neck.) Is she beautiful, Wittekind?

Wittekind: Yes.

Helge: Very beautiful?

Wittekind: Yes.

Helge: Is she good?

Wittekind: I hope so.

Helge: Does she love you?

Wittekind: I do not know. But she must learn to.

Helge: Do you love her?

Wittekind: No. But I will learn to.

Helge: That cannot be learned, Wittekind! I never had to learn it!

Wittekind: And yet you can! What should I say, then?

Helge: Say that you love me. Say only that.

Wittekind: That I dare not say.

Helge: Oh no!

Wittekind: How easy it would be for me to speak that word.

Helge: Then say it, Wittekind, if it is easy.

(During this exchange, the glow of spreading fire becomes visible through the window, behind the forest backdrop.)

Wittekind: Look out the window, Helge! There burns Wittekind's love. With this night, the Duke of the Saxons no longer belongs to himself, but to his tormented people.

Helge (horrified): That is the castellan's house in Wesel—the fortress—it's burning! Wittekind, what have you done?

Wittekind: Did you truly think I would content myself with capturing those clerical gentlemen who sleep so peacefully in their chambers upstairs?

Eighth Scene

The same. Manfried. Saxon riders, with Alkuin as prisoner. Gerbold.

Manfried (from above): Guards! Sound the alarm bell! The castellan's fortress in Wesel is burning!

Gerbold: The manor is surrounded, as you ordered.

Wittekind: Good. — Who is this man?

Gerbold: The scribe of the Frankish king—Alkuin of York. We seized his galley at the mouth of the Lippe.

Wittekind: Take a seat, Lord Rector.

Alkuin: I prefer to stand.

Wittekind: As you wish.

Manfried (above): Is the whole house asleep like a tomb? Guards!—Lord Desiderius! Lord Nuncio! Awake!

(He rattles at the doors, then footsteps are heard; Manfried descends the stairs.)

Manfried (with drawn sword): What is this silent gathering, Helge?

Wittekind: Hail, Manfried!

(The Saxon riders seize Manfried's sword.)

Wittekind (to the riders): Bring down the vultures from Rome—and the Apostle of the Danes.

(Riders go upstairs.)

Manfried (sits silently at the table, staring at Wittekind, who carefully wipes blood from a wound on his arm with a cloth.)

Wittekind: Your daughter wields a dagger not without skill, Lord Manfried! One must admit—you have succeeded in raising your youthful friend into a fierce fighter.

Manfried: Christ will reward that dagger-stroke of hers for all eternity.

Wittekind: I doubt it, old man. The All-Father loves such brave women for their own sake, for He believes that no special reward is needed either now or in eternity. He knows such women do what is noble and brave for the sake of the deed itself—not for some paltry reward that glimmers in the foggy distance of an unknown and doubtful hereafter.

Manfried: You seem to stand on good terms with the All-Father, Wittekind—you know His intentions rather well, it seems.

Wittekind: What you see dripping from my arm is not blood of His—it's my own. You used to know that well enough.

Manfried: Reason enough to cry anathema upon you!

Wittekind: Lord Alkuin, I am sorry you stand aside in anger. Sit down at the table.

Alkuin: Not until you tell me what this arrest of mine means—in the midst of deep peace!

Wittekind: It means war, Lord Rector. — Now I have given you your answer. Sit down.

(Alkuin obeys.)

Ninth Scene

On the gallery appear Desiderius, Isidorus, Ordino, and the Saxon riders. The same below.

Wittekind: There come the fruits with which the southern world has spoiled our taste. The All-Father did not build the mountains of the Alps high enough.

(The clerics, uncertain and hesitant, descend the staircase. They stand before Wittekind, who regards them for a long time.)

Wittekind: Which of you is Isidorus, the nuncio of Hadrian?

Isidorus: I am, noble Duke.

Wittekind: Call me Wittekind. That name is more familiar to you. Duke I am only to my Saxons—to you, a German peasant from the Ruhr.

Isidorus: As you command, Lord Wittekind.

Wittekind: And who is the Chamberlain Desiderius, the industrious letter-writer?

Desiderius: I am he.

Wittekind: And have you already been rewarded for that letter, Lord Chamberlain?

Desiderius: No. The humble servants of the Lord Christ receive their rewards without merit or worthiness—through grace alone.

Wittekind: Yes, the man from Nazareth is a convenient god. One may live a lifetime as a scoundrel, and repentance at the end brings grace and reward. Is it not so, Lord Chamberlain?

Desiderius: I wish that Lord Wittekind may learn the truth of his words at the end of his life.

Wittekind: I shall not find it so easy. You wrote that shameless letter to me without the king's knowledge. — Lord Rector of York, do you take your sovereign for a weakling?

Alkuin: No, for then I should not be his minister.

Wittekind: Do you think him so reckless as to favor a man not known for weakness? Do you believe the king so foolish as to travel to Italy and leave the offended man standing idle in his anger?

Alkuin (silent).

Desiderius: The king had nothing to do with the letter sent to you. It was merely a friendly warning, bidding you not to push matters to extremes.

Wittekind: Then I thank you for having written it—for otherwise Charles would have fallen upon me next year. I know somewhat, too, how the world goes. Your letter enlightened me, Lord Chamberlain. My most dangerous foe is not Charles—but Hadrian, and his secret, sinister chamberlains. Always I see behind the warring Germans the shadow of the priest's robe! You will not rest until all Germany swims in blood for the honor of that foreign man whom you call your God. Was it not too slow for the Pope when the apostles Manfried and Ordino sowed hatred and tears? Must it now be murder and blood? So be it! You shall have them—so that for centuries to come men shall still tell of Wittekind and his Saxons.

Desiderius: It was not the Franks who burned the fortress of Wesel. The Church bears no guilt, Lord Wittekind. True, we are a militant Church—and we are proud of it. But your attack upon the Wesel frontier was not of our making; we were without guile.

Wittekind: Indeed! As guileless as doves! You were so without guile that Brother Manfried has stored the tools of love—the crucifixes, relics, vestments, and girdles—in high stacks beneath the loft of his fine estate—no doubt so that in due time all the peasants of Saxony might, right after baptism, be tonsured! And under that same loft lie quite a few razors for the purpose!

Manfried (furiously): That is treason!

Wittekind: He who sows treason among his own folk will reap no love from them, Lord Manfried.

Manfried (stricken): In my own house!

Wittekind: Lord Alkuin—does the Church's conduct have your and the king's approval?

Alkuin (defiantly, without hesitation): Yes.

Wittekind (laughs): Thus speaks the Northman! I like it well enough. I await my cousin Albion, who has taken the camps at Wesel. I shall, of course, use them for purposes as peaceful as those intended by Lord Charles.

Alkuin (shaken): What?—Albion too? Albion, to whom the king but a few months ago sent the bay stallion as a gift, in thanks for approving the missions?

Wittekind: The same, Lord Rector. — And though we may be enemies in the future, let me offer you one counsel: tell Charles to beware when he deals with those foreign masters from Italy. They planned a vile trick, and indeed it succeeded—that must be granted. They meant to lay all the guilt upon Wittekind! The war is here, and Wittekind has begun it. That is what they wanted. But from their wickedness has come, first of all, their own folly. I may thank the Church for the king's weapons. Hear that hoofbeat? That is Albion!

(To the riders.) Bring my cousin in.

Tenth Scene

The same. Albion enters.

Albion: Wittekind! I see you have succeeded. My congratulations.

Wittekind: The castellan?

Albion (makes a telling gesture).

Wittekind: Fallen?

Albion: Yes. The camps and the harbor are in our hands.

Wittekind: Have you news from the upper Lippe?

Albion: Haltern surrendered yesterday after a brief fight.

Wittekind: And the missions? What has become of them?

Albion: The monks are packing baskets and chests. Your Lord Father has granted them three days—after that, they must be gone. And you—whom have you caught, my cousin?

Wittekind: These are the gentlemen who wrote me that friendly letter.

Albion: Praise to All-Father!—Where shall we hang them?

(The Romans recoil in terror.)

Wittekind: Now, now—an unfriendly letter is no crime worthy of the gallows.

(The Romans breathe with relief.)

Albion: Perhaps one day you'll regret, Wittekind, that you deprived Manfried's fine oak hall of these southern fruits. — Look there, the Rector from England!

Alkuin: I see, with deep sorrow, the friend of the king standing at Wittekind's side.

Albion: The king strangles the Germans in league with the foreigner Hadrian. Until that changes, I remain with Wittekind. Things are cleaner with him—and we Saxons love cleanliness. Perhaps you should advise the king to drive the true enemy back over the Alps instead of chasing un-German honors. A German realm under Charles's leadership? Why not? But, please, without the gentlemen from the Mediterranean. Above all, Lord Alkuin—out with the murderers of the German soul! We have no need of a redeemer who laments instead of keeping silent as a hero should. We Germans redeem ourselves, and whatever we do or think that is ignoble—we bear it as men. No god and no man can forgive us when it is done. Better to do better, Lord Alkuin—and to have clean hands, Lord Rector of England! Such is the All-Father—and such would we be also.

Isidorus (quietly): Anathema!

(Wittekind nods; the Saxons cheer.)

Alkuin: Your proposal is impossible, Duke of Verden.

Albion: No—but Lord Charles dare not accept it. That is the truth. And you know very well why! The blood of the last Merovingian clings darkly to all his deeds. Thus his fear of his god's vengeance drives him—and he cannot turn back.

Wittekind: The king must bear his fate, as we must bear ours. Enough. Open the cellar beneath the loft. Gerbold—take the key from Lord Manfried.

Manfried: Never!

Helge: I have the key, Wittekind! — Here it is!

Manfried (cries out): Helge, Helge!—My own daughter!

Helge: I no longer know father or father's house. It was you who forsook your people, not I! My homeland is Saxony—my faith is Wittekind!

Wittekind (gravely): I had built you a bridge, Manfried's daughter—and now you have burned it behind you. I do not know if you understand how hard the road will be that you now choose to walk with me.

Helge: The road is not hard, Wittekind. What you can do, I can also. I no longer think of myself. The fortress in Wesel burns for me as well.

Wittekind: So be it. — Gerbold.

Gerbold: My lord.

Wittekind: Bring the weapons to Haltern, along with the baggage of the prisoners. The priests themselves—escort them unharmed across the Rhine.

Gerbold: Do not loose these serpents, my lord!

Wittekind: I will not keep them as captives.

Albion: Cousin Wittekind, you will regret this one day!

Wittekind: I hold only fighting men as prisoners. What would Charles think of me if I kept unarmed men bound? Would he not then have the same right to do the same to my people? My orders stand, Gerbold. — My horse! I ride for Haltern. Good morning.

Curtain

Second Act

A landscape of forest and field. The royal tent of King Charles. Resting Frankish soldiers. A view of the plain with a river in the distance.

first Scene

Alkuin, Manfried, Desiderius, Isidorus, Frankish captains and soldiers

Alkuin: For half a human lifetime the king has wrestled with this Wittekind, and still no end is in sight.

Manfried: Was it not said, only a year ago, that the white duke was beaten and war-weary? And yet today a dreadful silence broods over the hills beyond the Weser, and no one knows what fate the next hour will bring. I cannot understand how an army of fifteen thousand warriors, with siege-equipment and train, can vanish without a trace in the forests of the Weserland.

Captain (shrugs his shoulders).

Desiderius: How long the section leader from Verden has remained with the king! One almost begins to long for holy Cologne.

Isidorus: A repulsive land!

Manfried: Perhaps His Holiness will soon recall Your Excellency to Rome. So long as poor Saxony still smokes with the blood of the slain and the fumes of burning homesteads, it cannot appear as fair as I once knew it in my youth. Then one could hear the maidens singing on the meadows, and the rich farms of the blond-haired Westphalians lay like jewels in the shade of green oaks. Joyful men rode strong horses to play and to work, and the Weser wound its ribbon, blue and silver, through the blooming fields. That was Westphalia— that was Saxon land. — Oh dear Lord Christ, what has become of my beautiful homeland for the sake of Thy holy name!

Isidorus: Your homeland is not of this world, brother.

Alkuin: The king will also heal the wounds of Saxony, Lord Manfried. I thank God that my duty at the king's side spares me from reflection, else pain and horror at this slow murder of a noble and valiant people might choke me as well.

Isidorus: Perhaps you will repeat that opinion once before the king's ears, dear brother Alkuin.

Alkuin: The king knows my view, Lord Nuntius.

Isidorus: Then it seems to me the ruler is poorly advised.

Alkuin: The king also knows that I am a poor servant, for I must serve two masters—him and the Church. And he also knows that the Nuntius from Rome bears little goodwill toward the Rector of York.

Desiderius: But my beloved brothers! Why such irritation in hard days, when we ought to stand together more fraternally than ever?

Isidorus: Humility before the Vicar of God seems to be a heavy burden for clerical lords of German stock.

Alkuin: It is certainly made bitter for them by the ungracious words of clerical lords who spring from the racial melting-pot of the eastern Mediterranean.

(Several Frankish captains turn away and with effort suppress their laughter.)

Desiderius: Dear Rector, I beg you earnestly—lower your voice! I remind you that you are speaking with the envoy of the Holy See in Rome.

Alkuin (sharply): And Lord Isidorus is speaking with the Rector of York! Nevertheless, I regret having raised my voice. Yet I would have been grateful if the cause for doing so had not arisen.
(Movement in the background. Frankish riders approach.)

Desiderius: I beg you, Brother Ordino, ask the leader whether he brings any news.
(Ordino speaks with the riders. Tension.)

Ordino (returning): Nothing.

Manfried (quietly to Alkuin): A calamity must have occurred. All communication with the Weser-South army group has been cut off for eight days. That Wittekind must be in league with the demons of hell.

Alkuin: The man has little to do with the devil.

Isidorus: I must agree with our brother Manfried. This is witchcraft. The girl Helge was a good Christian before Wittekind seduced her. For my part, there is no doubt that the child has been bewitched by that devilish duke.

Desiderius: I beg you, Lord Nuntius! Spare the feelings of a sorely tried father!

Manfried: I have no daughter anymore, Lord Chamberlain.

Isidorus: It would be interesting to know what Duchess Geva has to say about this strange alliance between Wittekind and Helge.

Ordino: At Duke Siegfried's court, they maintain silence about this double bond. It is simply known that nothing immoral can be found in it.

Isidorus: There we have it, venerable sirs! This is that much-praised moral rigor of the Germans! Wittekind lives in concubinage, and the duke's wife says nothing.

Ordino: Not a word of that is true, Lord Nuntius. I know the people between Weser and Elbe. They are very sensitive in such matters. A duke who offended against the moral code of his people would be impossible. Precisely here lie the roots of the untamed strength of the Westphalians and Frisians. And as long as those roots sit deep in their native soil, we shall have to reckon with that wild strength.

Isidorus: Then those roots must be cut.

Manfried: The king has been trying to cut them for fifteen years already.

Isidorus: If it cannot be done that way, then the roots must be eradicated—with poison and with fire—for the fig tree that bears bad fruit shall be hewn down and cast into the fire.

Manfried: Those are indeed the hard words of the dear Savior.

Isidorus: Beloved apostle of the Saxons! Forget not that the Lord also spoke words of gentleness. It would suffice if your people's rigid spirit were broken at its root—if it were made like unto the other peoples of the earth, humble in manner and compliant in soul. Only thus would it become receptive to the seed that so hardly takes root in Saxony. A blending of the people with Franks and Romans—by kindness or by force—would already work wonders.

Alkuin: And a little plague and pestilence along with it, Lord Nuntius. "Roman blending," indeed! I would not advise approaching the king with such counsel.

Isidorus: It is possible that the king already understands that even disease can, in the hands of our dear Lord Jesus of Nazareth, become a blessing, Lord Rector.

Alkuin: I see—you've already delivered that sermon to the king.

Isidorus (shrugs his shoulders).

Second Scene

Servant at the Tent. The previous characters.

Servant: The Lord Chamberlain and the Lord Nuntius to the king.
(Desiderius and Isidorus assume a humble posture and exit into the tent, whose curtain closes.)

Alkuin (paces, listening): I hear hoofbeats. It will again be nothing.

Ordino (peering): They are royal riders, coming from the Weser. This time they bring prisoners. At last, we shall learn something.

Alkuin: I would already be thankful for certainty of any kind.

Third Scene

Riders, captured Saxons (some wounded). Helge in male clothing, bound. The previous characters.

Rider Leader: Where is the king?

Alkuin (pointing to the tent): There. — Do you have news?

Rider Leader (bends toward Alkuin; the latter startles, then enters the tent without announcement).

Manfried: What has happened? You have prisoners?

Rider Leader: Even a girl among them!

Manfried: Since when do the Franks wage war against maidens?

Rider Leader: She was the most dangerous of them all. She stabbed Captain Gerdung in the neck.

Alkuin (at the tent entrance): Rider leader to the king.

Rider Leader (straightens weapon and helmet; exits into the tent. Voices are heard inside, agitated. Then silence.)

Helge (is pushed forward by the soldiers into the foreground).

Rider: Damn witch!

Manfried: Who is this woman?

Rider: We don't know. We caught her trying to burn the Nienfort Bridge with some peasants.

Manfried (recognizes his daughter, turns away, collapses at the table, burying his face).

Ordino: Poor brother!

Helge: Is the king in that tent?

Rider: You'll find out soon enough when you're called in.

Helge (laughs).

Ordino: Helge! Don't you see how your father suffers? And you laugh?

Helge: Does he grieve for the dead of his people? I no less—but I've learned from Wittekind to hold my head high and to laugh still. We have far greater cause for mourning.

Ordino: Unnatural child!

Servant (at the tent entrance): The king requests silence.

Rider (strikes Helge with the shaft of his spear. Helge collapses to her knees. Is struck again.)

Manfried (throws himself on the rider, then wraps his arms around Helge): Helge, Helge! My child, my poor child!

Helge: Let me go back to Wittekind.

Manfried: Come, my child. Sit upon the stool.
(He leads Helge to the table. Ordino assists.)

Ordino: Take a sip of wine, poor girl.

Helge (drinks): I thank you, Lord Ordino. Now it will be all right again; I've been beaten much today. And I am only a girl, not a man.

Manfried (head upon Helge's knees): My child, my poor, bewitched child!

Helge: So you too know now that I am bewitched? And do you name the sorcerer, Father? Wittekind he is called, so the people say. Wittekind! — He shall not see his Helge again. — I have always loved you very dearly, Father. But I loved my homeland more. Now, where your child stands at the end, I may say it.

(She bends down and kisses her father's hair.)

Ordino: Repentance comes too late!

Helge: You did not understand me, Ordino. I have nothing to repent—except, perhaps, that I served Wittekind too poorly.

Manfried: My dearest Jesus in Heaven, save my child!

Helge: Poor old father.

Servant (at the tent): The woman to interrogation.

Helge (slowly straightens herself; with Manfried approaches the tent. Because it is crowded with people, Helge must remain outside.)

Fourth Scene

The same. Alkuin's voice from inside the tent.

Alkuin: Maiden, I question you in the name of the king. Will you answer truthfully? If not, the torturers shall loose your tongue.

Helge: I will answer the king's questions—those that bring no harm to Lord Wittekind.

Alkuin: The king does not wish torture to be used, since you are a woman. — State your name and origin.

Helge: My name is Helge of the Manfried estate. I am the only daughter of Manfried, whom men call the Apostle of the Saxons. (Murmur of movement.)

Alkuin: The name Helge has meanwhile gained a painful fame, for the daughter betrayed her own father.

Helge: It was not the daughter who betrayed the father, Lord Rector of York, but the father who forgot his flesh and blood—forgot his soul and his

Saxon people—and cast them into misery for the glory of Jesus of Nazareth. Those who come after us will know that I speak the truth.

Alkuin: What will be said of us in future, none of us can know. You were caught in the night while attempting to destroy our war-bridge at Nienfort on the Weser with fire. Why did you wish to burn the bridge?

Helge: To hinder the Frankish army of the Weser-South group in its retreat across the river. (Murmur of surprise.)

Alkuin: To which host of the duke do you belong?

Helge: I serve Wittekind between Weser and Elbe, between the North Sea and the Thuringian Forest, in all the hosts and militias fighting within that land for their freedom. (Frankish captains chuckle quietly, half admiring.)

Rider: Cursed witch.

Alkuin: Have you seen the royal army that marched toward Hildesheim?

Helge: Yes, Lord Alkuin. I saw it march. And I saw also how it halted to rest at Mount Süntel. (Strong commotion inside and outside the tent.)

Alkuin: You mean that the king's army encamped at Süntel?

Helge: It encamped, yes—but it was not fortified.

Alkuin: Shall the torturers assist your memory?

Helge: Do with me as you will, Lord Alkuin. But forget not, in your chronicle, to write a chapter about the worth of a king's word.

Captain: Has such insolence ever been witnessed in the king's presence?

Manfried (throws himself before the tent entrance, kneeling before the king): Lord King, have mercy upon my poor deluded child. She knows not what she says!

Helge: I weigh every word, Lord Alkuin. I have spoken the truth. Fifteen thousand Franks, with horse and baggage, encamped at Süntel and sleep there still—until He awakens them, to whose glory and power they died, according to their faith. (Deep and lasting agitation. Some riders begin to prepare themselves.)

Alkuin: Do you mean to say, Manfried's daughter, that Wittekind has defeated the Weser-South army group?

Helge: I said nothing of the sort. (A sigh of relief goes around.)

Alkuin: Then I have misunderstood you?

Helge: I did not say that Wittekind defeated the Franks. I said that Wittekind annihilated them. I saw, at evening of the bloody day, not a single Frank living on the Süntel—and at the narrow pass only a few who, at sunset, had to surrender to the German duke. There were not many. Lord Wittekind sent me into the rear of the Frankish rearguard to complete the Cannae. What happened afterward I do not know, for I was captured while destroying the bridge at Nienfort. I presume the rearguard has since shared the army group's fate—and likewise has gone to rest. That is all I know. (Embarrassed silence. The Franks whisper anxiously among themselves. The tent curtain falls. Helge remains outside. Excited voices are heard within; the curtain opens again.)

Alkuin: What do you know of Duke Albion?

Helge: Nothing.

Alkuin: Then this unreliable ally of Lord Wittekind has abandoned him?

Helge (bursts out laughing): Abandoned him? — Tomorrow at dawn, Lord Albion will attack Verden!

Ordino (quietly to a captain): Is not the prisoner camp in Verden?

Captain: Yes, venerable apostle. Over four thousand Saxon and Danish prisoners are waiting there to be brought to the Rhine.

Alkuin: The interrogation is over. (Tent closes.)

Helge (returning to the table): What have I done! Wittekind! Wittekind!

Ordino: Nothing will happen to you, Helge. You have spoken bravely and truthfully.

Helge: I should not be praised by the enemy for it. Wittekind, Wittekind! What have I said? (Sobs.)

Manfried: Poor child, you said nothing that could harm Wittekind.

Helge: Lord Alkuin noticed it! I saw it in the flash of his eyes! Alkuin knew at once what folly I had committed.

Ordino: I simply don't understand it. For defense against an attack it's already far too late. Charles can at most recall the command from Verden.

Helge: Wittekind, Wittekind!

Ordino, (pointing to the riders who are preparing their gear): These warriors have a keen sense — they are arming for departure. We will not remain here much longer. (Agitated exchange of words in the tent.)

Manfried: God in Heaven! I feel a dread, and I do not know why! (Captains speak excitedly together. Restlessness.)

Servant (at the tent): The horses for the king and the burgrave of Verden! (Tent closes.) (Riders hurry behind the scene. Voices swell outside the tent, then subside, swell again. Then silence.)

Helge: Wittekind, Wittekind!

Drdino (bitterly): We have no reason to call for his presence!

Helge: What do you know of my torment!

Manfried: My poor child.

Helge: Oh, if you knew how right you are. The curse of the Saxon people lies upon me, for I betrayed Wittekind.

Manfried: We suspected this misfortune even before you spoke of it.

Helge: You do not understand me, Father. What I have done I will bear alone, as Wittekind taught me.

Fifth Scene

(Same as before. The tent opens. King Karl, with bowed head, quickly crosses the scene. Several high-ranking leaders follow him. Those standing outside salute without looking at Helge. The king and his retinue exit.)

Sixth Scene

(Same as before. Desiderius. Isidorus.)

Isidorus (rubbing his hands): So it has always been, Lord Chamberlain. In danger Charles shows his greatness! At last he takes the measures I have fought for years — measures that will surely find the full approbation of the Holy Father.

Desiderius: I beg you to consider, Lord Nuntius, that in this case the Church has cause to assume responsibility. The secular power alone must bear the burden of punishment. I am of the opinion that the Church may only, with deep sorrow, acknowledge the hard decisions of the king.

Isidorus: I too am deeply moved, Lord Chamberlain, and I agree with you. The king's orders are an outcome of the necessities of war. I thank you heartily for expressing your concerns. (Looks at Helge.) There she is still — the Saxon devil.

Helge (stares at him with hatred).

Isidorus: Wittekind will be grateful to you, my child. Albion will find the nest empty. And three thousand Saxon peasants will owe their descent into hell to the mouth of a frail, dark-mouthed woman.

Desiderius: Reverend Nuntius!

Seventh Scene

(Alkuin comes out of the tent with parchments. His walk is unsteady.)

Alkuin: I ask the captains to approach. (Captains step up to Alkuin. Expectant silence.)

Alkuin (in a hoarse voice): Commander of the fifth company.
Captain 5: Here.

Alkuin (reads aloud): Order of the king. Forty executioners with execution-axes — proceed immediately to Verden. They are to arrive there in good time so that their duty may be completed before midnight. If the necessary number of executioners is not available, then criminals from the prison in Verden are to be taken. They will be guaranteed safe conduct. — Do you understand me?

Captain 5 (uncertain): Yes, Lord Rector.

Alkuin (in a dry, professional tone): Since Verden will probably be attacked at dawn the following day by Albion, it is no longer possible to transfer the captured Saxons and Danes from the Verden camp.

Captain 5 (quickly): I pledge to return the prisoners across the river by midnight, Lord Alkuin.

Alkuin: I did not ask you that, Captain. The king is convinced it is not possible. That must suffice. The king has therefore ordered that the captured Saxons and Danes — to the number of four thousand five hundred and thirty-one (in a breaking voice) — be put to death with the axe.

(Helge screams in despair, tears at her bonds. Riders press their shoulders and shove Helge onto the table.) (Deep shock. Isidorus and Desiderius fold their hands. The apostles kneel and pray.)

Alkuin: Have you understood me, Captain?

(The captain steps back. Silent.)

Alkuin (hands the captain the parchment, looking at Helge with painful expression): Will you acknowledge the signature of his majesty?

Captain 5 (staring at the parchment): Is it not possible that one of the Italian lords…?

Isidorus: I must beg you!

Alkuin: You must obey, Captain, otherwise—. I must insist.

Captain 5 (bitterly): I obey. (Exits.)

Alkuin: Commander of the fourth company.
Captain 4: Here.

Alkuin: Do you still have fresh horses with your company?

Captain 4: Only a few, Lord Alkuin. The Gallic company 8, however, only arrived five days ago from the Loire. Their mounts are fat and fresh.
Alkuin: Company leader of the 8th.

Captain 8: Here!

Alkuin: I greet you on the north bank of the Weser, Captain. If we had time, you would have to tell me of my beloved Tours. Unfortunately that is not possible. How many riders count in your company, excluding the sick and the baggage?

Captain 8: Nine hundred, Lord Rector of York.

Alkuin: Tomorrow at dawn one hundred riders will set out under the command of the leader of the 8th company. The new company withdraws from the ranks of the Weser forces and will tomorrow at noon be assigned here on

this side of the Weser, nine miles west of Verden at the forest exit on the road to Dôsenbrügge. — Captain, the king entrusts you with a task for which you personally vouch. Read for yourself what the king orders.

(Captain 8 studies the parchment laboriously. Then, offended:)

Captain 8: Does the king need a Frankish knight for that? — I request to report to the king.

Alkuin (coldly): I am sorry, Captain. This is not for discussion. Do you recognize the king's signature?

Captain 8 (silent, staring at the parchment in anger).

Alkuin: Assembly points are Münster, Haltern and Wesel. The main assembly point is Cologne on the Rhine. The measure must be carried out with the greatest haste, for we do not know how God the Lord will turn the fortune of war. — Have you any further questions?

Captain 8: No, Herr Rector.

Alkuin (extends his hand): I, however, have one more request, dear friend. Act as a man and a Christian toward the poorest. Avoid any harshness that is unnecessary. Take plenty of straw and warm blankets from every farmstead so they do not have to freeze. Winter is at the door. And think of your own wife, your own little daughter, when you… when you… (turns away.)

Captain 8 (bursting out): By the holy Christ of Nazareth! Is this still war, Herr Rector?!

Alkuin (darkly): Do your duty and ask no questions. What you carry out, others are responsible for, not you.

Captain 8 (hesitates, then bows before Alkuin. Exits.)

Alkuin: Dear brothers Manfried and Ordino. The king commands you to travel promptly to Wesel, where you have special duties to fulfill. Come into the tent. I must speak with you.

(Alkuin, Manfried, and Ordino go into the tent. A servant steps before it, closes the curtain, and stands guard.)

Eighth Scene

Isidorus. Desiderius. Helge.

Isidorus: At last the stubborn people will submit to the will of the Holy Church! The Church has triumphed! If Karl had heeded the warnings of the Roman See earlier, then the calamity on Mount Suntel would not have been necessary. It is very, very gratifying that at last thorough work is being done. The Church can continue to pursue its aims! Herr Chamberlain! The victory is ours!

Desiderius: We must not underestimate Widukind, Herr Nuncio.

Isidorus: Certainly, I do not underestimate him. Yes, the struggle may rage for a few more years, and Widukind may even gain further military successes, as is unfortunately the case at the moment. But then the struggle will ebb away, like a brook that dries up once its source is stopped.

Desiderius: I admit, in a few years under the new conditions, there will be no new generation to continue the fight. That is true—but it may still take a very long time before this measure leads to the enemy's collapse.

Isidorus: Well, there need not even be a lack of offspring. I cannot bring myself to think of anything so cruel. It will be enough if the offspring—become more humble.

Desiderius: Humble? Permit me to laugh, Your Reverence! I can hardly imagine the sons of Widukind becoming humble.

Isidorus: If they are no longer true and pure sons of Widukind, then perhaps they will, Herr Chamberlain. A blended wine is not worse if the blending is done carefully. Are not the Franks good, humble Christians? Yet they spring from a gentle mixture, and if my knowledge of Roman history does not deceive me, I believe the great Julius began the mixing of Gallic blood. What succeeded there will also be possible among the Saxons—indeed, among all Germans.

Helge (rises behind the Nuncio).

Desiderius: What does that woman want?

Isidorus (turns around, recoils before Helge's gaze. To the guards): Take the woman away! I do not wish to see her again!

Soldiers (grab Helge and push her off).

Helge (cries out): Alkuin! Alkuin! Father!

Alkuin (emerges from the tent): Who calls?—Helge, I must speak with you. Your father also wishes to say a few words to you. Come into the tent.—

Remove the girl's bonds and bring her something to eat, also wine and fresh water. Forget not the captive peasants. (Helge's hands are untied. Helge goes into the tent.)

Isidorus: That girl has daggers in her eyes!

Desiderius: What is that woman to us?

Alkuin (at the tent entrance): Herr Camp Commander! Have preparations made for departure. Lodgings for His Holiness's Nuncio and for the Herr Chamberlain! We ride to the Weser bank opposite the mouth of the Möhne. There is the king. (Goes into the tent. Preparations for departure.)

Curtain

Third Act

A wooden hall — the prisoners' camp at Verden. Behind it, sunken below, a courtyard, reached by a staircase leading downward. The audience cannot see into the courtyard. A strong wooden gate separates the courtyard from the hall. A door in the gate. To the left, a table and bench. Crows fluttering in the courtyard. Pale light. During the first scenes, night fades into dawn and morning.

First Scene

Captain. Three Frankish guards. Later fourteen executioners.

Captain (calling down into the courtyard): Hurry up! Morning is coming.

Executioner (from below): No butcher ever slaughtered faster than we have, sir.

Captain: You were to be finished by midnight—and now the day is already dawning!

Executioner (from below): No worry, Captain. The last one is gone over. The crows are early today—yes, the blood-smoke lures them! They're no different from kings and great lords.

Captain: Then come up and be off to the devil!

Executioner (comes up the stairs into the hall, with a cloth and axe. The other executioners follow with axes.)

Captain: Out of here! The Saxon vanguard already stands in Verden. You've no time to lose.

(Executioners stumble hastily out, to the left.)

Captain (to the guards): Extinguish the torches!—Jesus, that reeking stench of fresh blood!

(Torches go out. Dawn. The Captain approaches the gate, shudders, covers his eyes with his arm.)

Guard (locks the gate with a dull clang): From now on, the war captives whom Widukind sends us will fare just as these Saxon men have.

Captain (broken): This is no longer war! This is butchery! I think I've turned gray overnight.

Guard: Will the holy Christ in Heaven rejoice when he sees this in the light of day?

Captain: How should I know? The heathens He cast away from before His face—that's what I was taught. We have only to obey. All else is evil.

Guard: They say the king does everything the Holy Church demands. Then the king has done right?

Captain: Don't ask! How should I know everything? It must be right.

Guard: I never believed it would take a whole night to slaughter forty-five hundred men.

Captain: Come away from here—it makes me sick.

Guard: There they lie, all of them, the Saxon men. And yet they were brave soldiers, just like us!

Captain: Keep your wisdom to yourself!

(Silence. From behind the gate, one hears the crows screaming.)

Captain: Did a man just groan?

Guard: It's possible. Perhaps one of the Saxons wasn't struck dead outright.

Captain: It chills my blood.

Guard: Let's go, Captain.

Captain: Must wait until the outposts are withdrawn.

Guard: I'm freezing. It's bitter cold on the banks of the Weser!

Captain: The early mists creep like pale ghosts over the bloody courtyard.

Guard: This damned tomb-like silence! I can hear the blood moving in my veins. (Silence.)

Captain (listening): Hush—here they come. I can hear them. They're moving softly through the hall.

Second Scene

The same. Frankish outposts enter from the right.

Scout: Is the Captain here?

Captain: Yes. Is everything in order?

Scout: All accounted for, sir! The Saxons won't attack again today. They're only probing toward Verden with weak scouting parties. Apparently they don't yet know that we've evacuated it. We could have taken the prisoners with us, then.

Captain: Hold your tongue. — We've nothing more to do here. Move out!

Guard: Thank Heaven we're leaving this place!

(They exit. It slowly grows lighter. The crows shriek and flutter behind the gate. Wind rattles the roof-shingles. One hears roosters crowing, dogs barking in the distance. A sense of frosty grave-like stillness.)

Third Scene

Saxon warriors enter.

1st Warrior: All is quiet. The Franks are gone! They've taken the prisoners with them. I would never have thought the fright from Mount Suntel would have shaken the Frankish Karl so deeply that he'd flee headlong from strong Verden! Lord Albion will be glad to have his fortress back at last.

2nd Warrior: A fortress? Only a few charred beams stretch their black fingers into the air. This place is uncanny. Look—those crows swarming over the prison yard! The birds are fighting over the bits of bread left behind.

1st Warrior: Don't you think there's a strange smell here?

2nd Warrior: Exactly like that autumn evening when we struck the Franks at Suntel and the blood of the fallen soaked through the heath.

(Both advance cautiously toward the gate. A terrible outcry.)
1st and 2nd Warriors (open the gate and go down. Furious shouts rise from below.)

Fourth Scene

New warriors rush in.

3rd Warrior: Fetch the Duke!

Several: Widukind! Widukind!

(Some run off to call for Widukind. Others stand at the gate, shaking their fists; still others hurry down the stairs into the courtyard.)

1st Warrior (coming up from the courtyard): Come here, men! This is what the Nazarenes have done! This is what the Christians have done—who preach love and bring murder!

2nd Warrior (comes up): Where is the Duke? Is he coming? Men! Brothers! My father lies below. I found his severed head!—Where is Widukind?!

(Runs off shouting.) Widukind! Widukind! (The cry fades away.)

Centurion: Secure the approaches toward the Weser! Nienborg, take your group to the path by the flax field. Holting, yours into the copse at the river bend. — That's all we need now, for the Franks to strike us this moment!

1st Warrior: I can't find my boy! He was wounded in the Verden camp! Help look for him!

(Again they run down into the yard.)

Fifth Scene

The same. Widukind. Gerbold. Scribe. Retinue.

Widukind: Are the troop deployments ready against Karl?

Commander of the Hundreds: They are ready, Your Grace.

Widukind: What has happened? I did not understand the men who called me. Who has been murdered?

Commander of the Hundreds (silently points into the yard).

Widukind (at the gate; stands in silence. Silence.) Call my cousin Albion. (Pause.) Gerbold!

Gerbold: Here!

Widukind: The Frankish colonel La Torre from Lyon lives as a guest on your farm as a prisoner of war?

Gerbold: Yes, Your Grace. He is a friendly man, and my children are fond of him.

Widukind: I condemn Colonel La Torre to death by the axe. — Which company leaders and troupe-captains still lie as prisoners on your estate on the Elbe?

Gerbold: Five more, Your Grace.

Widukind: I condemn them to death by the axe. — How many Franks lie in the Elbe camp?

Gerbold: One hundred and eighty-three, not counting the wounded, Your Grace. They work on Count Lutbrand's fields.

Widukind: How many including the wounded?

Gerbold: Two hundred and five, Your Grace.

Widukind: I condemn them all, the wounded included, to death by the axe. — Gerbold. Dispatch immediately a mounted troop to Hilbesheim. The prisoners from Suntel are to be intercepted on the road wherever they now are. I condemn them to death by the axe. — Scribe.

Scribe: Your Grace!

Widukind: Write in notes, as you are used to with me.

Scribe: I am ready.

Widukind: First: To all gau-leaders and their deputies. I call Saxon youth from their fifteenth year to arms. Rallying points in the Elbe-gau. Instructors of arms are to be requisitioned directly from the counts by me. — I call able-bodied men up to their seventieth year to arms. They form special companies under self-chosen leaders. — Do you have that, scribe?

Scribe: I have it written, Your Grace. — So.

Widukind: I call all maidens and women from their twentieth year to arms. At the farms, women from their fortieth year remain. The wagon-boys join the fighting muster, with the exception of the leaders; the called-up maidens and women go to the baggage train. — Are you following?

Scribe: Yes.

Widukind (to the Saxons present): Do you, men, understand what these summons mean?

Many (shout): War! Vengeance for the murder! Better dead than a slave! Long live freedom!

Sixth Scene

The same. Albion with retinue.

Widukind: Come here to me, cousin Albion! — Look into the yard!
(Albion drops his sword and runs down the stairs.)

(Some of Albion's retinue go partly down into the yard. Occasional cries of fury.)

Albion (climbs slowly up into the hall).

Widukind: Did you look at him carefully, cousin?

Albion: Did we not once hold Karl to be an honorable knight, no worse or better than we are?

Widukind: And what do you think of him now?

Albion: He has forfeited the name and honor of a knight. When we say "love" we mean love, and when we say "hate" we mean hate. From this day on, men of Westphalia, that hate shall be our daily bread. Wherever Saxon swords are drawn from now on, let every blow be hate, let every stroke be vengeance!

Captain: We will attack! Today, Widukind! Even this hour! (Great tumult. Swords raised. Shouts.)

Widukind: Saxons! Do you know what I thought when I looked down through the gate into that bloody yard? — Listen. You have often been surprised when in calmer times I gave outward signs of sorrow, when I found words of lament for a man who in the struggle for freedom stood near my heart — that I lost my voice when my comrade Helge did not return. You have often thought Widukind had no heart. That he is a lifeless wheel that turns the millstones. Yet I know very well that my inner conviction has always bound the threads of my love day and night around Germany's white children, whom Mother Nature fashioned bright, fair, and innocent. I have never spoken to you of that love. — Saxons! It would be easy for me, faced with the murdered fathers and sons of

your kindreds, to lead the forces here at Verden into an attack on Karl the Frank. But the duke must not yield to the hour's passions. Gather your souls together, Wittekinds! Steady your minds and wills for the day when Widukind strikes. — Will you lightly give up the final victory you began at Suntel?

All: No!

Widukind: Will you, when the horn sounds, lay the dead of a second assault upon the pyres of these murdered ones?

All: No!

Widukind: We will become hard, Wittekinds! Therefore every priest of the Christian God who falls into our hands shall suffer death. And I swear to you, Saxons, proud people of the Wittekinds, that I will give up everything I have — and I think I am rich enough to be able to give it: body, goods, honor I pledge before the dead of my people to the future of my Wittekinds, that they remain white and pure in blood and soul. May the All-Father, whose children we are, help me. (Movement. Many remove their helmets; others raise their hands.)

Albion: There shall be only one duke in Germany: Widukind! And there shall be but one spear-point of the battle that strikes at the enemy's heart — Widukind! So I too swear before the slaughtered of my clan.

Gerbold: Include me in the oath, cousin Albion!

All: Me too, me too! I swear! Let Widukind be the sole leader in Saxony!

Widukind (takes Albion's hand and that of a warrior): Do you know, men, that this promise means victory? And if Wittekind ever betrays you, if he ever proves unfaithful to his folk, then may contempt and the curse of the Saxon people fall upon him.

(All silently remove their helmets.)

Widukind: Better than loud oaths sounds this silent promise in my ear. — Forged together are we now for all time: Widukind and the Saxons, the Saxons and Widukind! A great love unites us from this day forward, and an unshakable certainty dawns with this morning — that Germany shall not perish, if it acts as we have vowed to act. — Now, Saxons, go down into the courtyard, break open the gate toward the road, and bear the dead to Lord Albion's castle. There a pyre shall be raised, whose flames shall return the bright souls of Germany's sun-children to the All-Father. But let that blaze also announce to the butcher Karl that he has accomplished something he did not intend — that he

has kindled a fire in the souls of the German people which will soon enough burn him terribly.

(All press forward, extending their hands to Widukind and Albion. Movement. Slowly, one after another, they withdraw and go into the courtyard. One hears the gate being broken open.)

Seventh Scene

Widukind. Albion. (They clasp hands. Later, a Saxon warrior enters.)

Widukind (matter-of-factly): Is your castle well secured, so that the work on the pyre can be completed without disturbance from any attack?

Albion: My own hundred-man guard is stationed there. In addition, strong pickets line the Weser. Today Karl cannot attack without being seen the moment he moves across the flat meadows.

Widukind: By evening we'll be finished. Then we'll withdraw the advanced position on the Aller. This autumn, despite the victory at Suntel, I will not attack again — our losses have been too heavy.

Warrior (from the left): Is Widukind here?

Widukind: Yes. What is it?

Warrior: Our Helge from Manfried's homestead has returned! She came just now from the Frankish field watch — and we had already lowered our spears! Then I recognized her in time — it was our Helge!

Widukind (restraining his joy): Helge!! Where is she? (Embraces Albion.)

Eighth Scene

The same. Helge enters.

Widukind (rushes toward her, seizes both her hands, and is about to speak).

Helge: Widukind!

Widukind: Helge — my Helge! My good spirit in battle and in the hour of hard decisions! All-Father! Is it possible they have freed you? Is Karl mad? Does he not know what the name Helge means to the Saxons?

Helge: Widukind, it would have been better had your Helge fallen — than to see the bridges of the Weser burn.

Widukind: Brave woman! Through your deed I was able to catch and destroy the Frankish rearguard after a night march! And yet I bitterly regretted sending you out.

Helge: It was very hard for me to come to you, Widukind.

Widukind: Hard for you?

Helge: Yes. I come at the request of the king and of his counselor Alkuin, the rector from England.

Widukind: The king asked you?

Helge: Yes, Widukind. The king asked it of me. But he said more — he laid the guilt for the death of the prisoners at Verden upon me. And, Widukind — the king spoke the truth!

Albion: What vile deceit has that butcher invented, to dare say such a thing to our Helge!

Helge: Lord Albion! The king knew what he said — and what he said is true. I told the rector of York that you would attack Verden during the night. Karl then, under the pretext that the prisoners could no longer be brought back in time, ordered their execution.

Widukind: Helge! Don't let Karl deceive you! Their removal was possible! The guilt for the massacre lies on the King of the Franks for all time. No — the slaughter was decided even without your words. And, Helge, it has awakened us.

Albion: The war with the Franks truly begins only today! What happened before was nothing!

Widukind: Helge, forget the dead! Have I not in these fifteen years led thousands of my Saxons into death? Freedom is not won by prayer. — Helge, be hard with yourself!

Helge (cries out in despair): Widukind!

Widukind (troubled): What is this, Helge? What have they done to you?

Helge: Widukind — we have lost the war. Irretrievably lost.

Albion: Helge — are you mad?

Widukind: Come, my Helge. Go down into the courtyard with me. Compose yourself, Helge. — There our men are carrying away the dead. While the warm blood of the murdered still ran over the stones of the yard, I swore not to abandon my people. Do you think I have become a weakling?

Helge: Listen to Lord Alkuin of York! I saw the rector kneel before the king, Wittekind! He pleaded for the salvation of Nordic blood — he, the enemy of the land!

Widukind: Then fear has driven him mad.

Helge: No, no, Wittekind! Hear Lord Alkuin!

Widukind: What am I to do with that crippled German soul? Lost time. Lost words.

Helge: Shall I beg you on my knees, Duke? Are you so used to Lady Helge? — Listen to Lord Alkuin, Wittekind, just hear him! Nothing else! You do not know how terror runs in my veins! The king has things in mind that I only suspected. I was there when Lord Alkuin gave King Karl's orders to the mounted leaders. And his voice broke from pain. The pain was not feigned, Wittekind. It came from the depths of his soul. But I saw the Nuncio from Rome grin like a devil, and he spoke dark words to the chamberlain, that now the Church has triumphed. — Wittekind, I beg you, hear Lord Alkuin!

Widukind (disturbed): How should I listen to the rector who sits over there in the Frankish camp?

Helge: He is here. I brought him. The guards promised me they would harm him until you decide what shall be done with him. (Pause.)

Albion: Wittekind! We have the first of this accursed brood in the priest's rod. Bring him here, Helge. Our axes await him.

Widukind: Have blood and the executioner's axe prepared, cousin. Bring forth the rector of York. It is a pity that one of the best should be the first to meet my vengeance. (Albion exits.) Hey, guard! Outside stands a Frank who wishes to speak with me, a lamb that has become a wolf. Bring him in. I will hear this man's confession. Another will have to finish it afterwards. And that one will begin with how Widukind struck down the rector of England. (Guard exits.)

Ninth Scene

The same. Albion returns.

Albion: There's plenty of wood in the yard. There's not even a shortage of axes.

Widukind: Good.

Tenth Scene

The same. Alkuin (the rector) appears.

Widukind: Welcome, Rector of York! You come at the right time. My Saxons are just carrying the murdered to the pyre. You shall lie highest.

Alkuin (composed): I thank you for the courteous greeting, Duke. I am prepared to die for it. Yet I beg you hear me first. There will not be much in what I say.

Widukind: I will listen to you.

Alkuin: My lord and king Charlemagne is greatly shaken by the news of the heavy defeat of his army-group Weser South at Mount Suntel. He has lost the belief that he could force you by the sword. He does, however, know that the war may yet last long, but he fears losing it.

Widukind: I hope so. If it depends on me, his fear shall be fulfilled.

Alkuin: Therefore the king is resolved to wrest victory from you by other means. Although Karl is under no obligation to follow the counsel of his confidants, the plan has nevertheless received approval from decisive circles.

Widukind: Name them. Those circles sit in Rome. You said you would be brief.

Alkuin: And you promised to listen.

Widukind: Go on.

Alkuin: I assume, my lord duke, that within a short time you will have bound victory to your arms. Then you will return with your warriors into your land between Rhine and Weser. The land will still be the same, Wittekind. But the people—you will not recognize them again.

Widukind: And if I find them half-starved and broken, I will nourish and tend them until they are as they once were, before the murderous sword of the Lord Christ reaped its bloody harvest among them.

Alkuin: You do not understand me, my lord duke! If my northern blood did not revolt against the horror that has been decided upon—do you think, Herr Widukind, that I would stand before you today, today, only a few hours after the slaughter of four thousand captive Germans? — Listen! A thousand Frankish riders are, at this very hour, sweeping up and down the Weser, for twenty Roman miles in depth, riding from farm to farm, from manor to manor, and driving together all Saxon girls and women from the age of ten up to forty, and bringing them to Münster. But they will not remain there. They are being taken to the Rhine, to the collection camps at Cologne, Mainz, Trier, Aachen…

Albion (roaring): Wittekind! We attack! It must be so! We attack this very day!

Widukind (stares into Alkuin's face, gestures Albion to be silent).

Alkuin: This is only the first column of German maidens being driven away. It numbers about ten thousand. Karl has divided your land into strips twenty miles deep. There are six such strips, my lord duke! And sixty thousand women and girls will be transported to the collection camps I named. Your land is empty, Wittekind! Before the winter is over, your homesteads will be desolate. Through ice and snow the youth of your people will wander toward the Rhine. — I do not know how you will ever see them again.

Widukind (in terrible tension): I will bring them back!

Alkuin: You may burn Cologne, plow Aachen under, make Mainz and Trier places of horror and death — what will you have achieved?

Widukind: Even if I save only a thousand out of sixty thousand! With them I will rebuild my proud race of the Wittekinds!

Alkuin: You will find them all again, or almost all. But, Duke Widukind, you will curse the hour that you find them. — In Cologne on the Rhine there stands a camp of wooden, filthy barracks, far beyond the city gates, enclosed by tall stockade walls. And within sit the camp-slaves who work in the harbor, the deserters who left Karl's armies because they were cowards. There sits the human scum of the Mediterranean—desperate lads from the delta of the Nile, from the reeking ports of Arabia, Jews, Greeks, Italians, and Moors. The larger part of this camp—so has Karl decreed—will be cleared for the German women; the smaller part will remain occupied by the rabble I named to you. And, Duke Widukind! The king intends to order that no wall, no fence be set between the two parts. — During the course of the winter there will then occur what no

duke on earth can undo, what no victory of arms can ever heal. Some of the girls and women may take their own lives. Yet remember that the winter march has already broken their will. Hunger, frost, and filth will break the resistance of their honor as well. You now know, Widukind, what kind of northern blood you will find when you march victorious into the Rhinelands. — Nothing, Widukind. Ruined is your bright, proud people, defiled and poisoned at the root. And that is why I have come. And I am ready to die by your executioners. Perhaps my words were worth the sacrifice of my life. (Deep emotion. Long silence.)

Wittekind: You pigs!

Alkuin (collapses at the table and hides his face).

Wittekind: Did you come only to tell me this boy's story?

Alkuin: I came to avert the terrible.

Wittekind: Are you finished?

Alkuin: No. — But I do not know whether you will hear me further.

Wittekind: I — I will hear you further now.

Alkuin: I begged the king to abandon his plan. It was in vain. Moreover the king consented that I should come to you with Helge. Karl was conscious of his success, as long as you would only listen to me. Karl knows all too well that the Duke of the Saxons loves his people more than life and personal honor. He knows that Wittekind's stubborn will will break before the… before the baseness.

Albion: Then we must learn from the Christians how baseness builds a sham brotherhood around Jesus of Nazareth!

Alkuin: Not everything that Christian men do will one day be approved at God's judgment seat.

Wittekind: I am placed before grave decisions.

Alkuin: You will have to carry these decisions to the end of your life, Lord Duke Wittekind. I do not envy you such a life, which you will live burdened with this curse. Yet there are in this century only two shoulders strong enough for it. — They are yours.

Wittekind: What else has the king to tell me?

Alkuin: Karl offers you peace.

Wittekind: On what conditions?

Alkuin: The king demands that you and Lord Albion submit to baptism and thus enter the community of Christian princes.

Wittekind: I am no prince and can do without such a community. I am a peasant from the Ruhr and only in war am I a duke.

Alkuin: In return the king is prepared, immediately after baptism, to lead the deported women and girls unimpeded back to their homes and to compensate them richly for the injustice suffered. He is also prepared to rebuild your homesteads and castles on the Ruhr and to honor you, like Lord Albion, with all honors and goods, to grant you a — even if limited — self-government and to heal the wounds that your country has suffered to the best of his power. (Pause.)

Wittekind: The king demands that I commit the most terrible betrayal a German heart can imagine against my people! — If my Saxons hear of the sham baseness that has wrested the children from my hands…

Alkuin: Stop! Here see the last and heaviest condition of the king. Karl can still justify the removal of the girls from the strip close to the Weser by saying it is for the welfare of those women, so that they do not suffer in the combat zone. The further deportations and the placing in the collection camps of horror, however, he could not justify before history. Therefore the king demands that you never under any circumstances and under no condition reveal that you had any knowledge of this plan. Only under this condition does the peace have value for the king. Karl stands in favorable negotiations with the Holy See in Rome. He hopes to revive the Roman Empire under German leadership, the Roman Empire of the German nation. It would be undesirable if the new crown were tainted with any visible blemish.

Wittekind: I understand. Karl needs a new Christ who bears the king's sins. And this Christ, Rector of York, shall be me!

Alkuin: I will follow your line of thought as a heathen, Lord Duke. And if I do so, my answer is: Do it.

Albion: Wittekind! Hear the man no longer! Call Gerbold that he may have this infamous priest's head struck off.

Alkuin: The same demand — that you become such a new Christian — is made by the king to you, Lord Albion of Verden. If this condition is rejected, then further negotiations have no more sense.

Albion: Madness speaks through you, Herr Alkuin! Do you think I would lend my hand to such shameful betrayal, would throw my honor into the dust, after I swore the very opposite only an hour ago?

Alkuin: If you do not, Duke Albion, then in a few years in your homeland by the Weser you will see children playing who are strangers to you in nature and kind, in the color of eyes and hair — who stand at the farm gate, Frankish and joyless, and look at you with foreign black eyes. But with the blood, the German soul too will be corrupted — and you, yes you, will have to reproach yourself that you could have prevented all this but did not wish to prevent it, because your honor before men was dearer to you than the pure blood of your German people.

Albion: All-Father! What shall I do? Wittekind, Wittekind! Speak a word, Wittekind!

Wittekind: Go on. We were speaking of Karl's last condition.

Alkuin: The king is content with your word as a nobleman that you will not speak of the plan. The same applies to the Duke of Verden and to Lady Helge of Manfried's farm.

Wittekind: What will the chronicle say?

Alkuin: I write the history of peoples and kings — that is, of deeds — not the history of thoughts and plans — that is, of smoke. History too will not justify the Saxon dukes, will not remove from them the stain of betrayal of their people. The question is only whether they are great enough to bear even that. — I am finished. Perhaps Lady Helge can say it better than I could. She is a woman and feels the danger more keenly than…

Helge: How little you know Wittekind, Herr Alkuin. His decision is made. You do not know that I have learned to read the soul of this great man.

Wittekind (gives Helge his hand): Never, since All-Father joined us and united us in love for Germany, have I felt how near you were to me as I have just now, when my soul wandered through the centuries that lie before us.

Helge (in an outburst of joy): Wittekind!

Wittekind (raises his hand in solemn calm): It is not about you and me. We must all today cast from us what was dear and familiar — honor and standing before our own brothers — we must see how we reconcile ourselves with what men call life. Baseness and deceit wind their feverish tendrils around our clean, bright souls; yes, Herr Alkuin! That is what they are — clean and bright! These two jewels adorn our crowns. These two ideas gleam in the far

heights of our being — heights you cannot reach. But they are delicate and fragile, and where the false splendor of the Christian king now drags them into the dust, we are disarmed.

Alkuin: You forget that those jewels are imperishable, that they renew themselves eternally from generation to generation — so long as our fair-eyed northern people remain the clear vessel in which they rest.

Wittekind: Enough. — Has Karl more demands?

Alkuin: None.

Wittekind: Then hear my answer. — The Duke of Verden, my cousin Albion…

Albion: Wittekind!

Wittekind: You waste strength, struggling in the false fetters that Karl has thrown about your neck, old friend. — Rector of York, Duke Albion and I are ready, under the stated conditions, to make peace and receive the baptism of the Christian Church. We promise to let nothing of this meeting become known. — I — I ask for an audience with the King of the Franks. — You may keep your head, Herr Alkuin. I am bitterly sorry for it.

Alkuin: May I kiss your hand, my lord duke?

Wittekind: I dislike displays, Rector of York.

Alkuin: It would have been anything but that.

Wittekind: I ask you to commend me to the — king.

Alkuin (bows).

Wittekind: Anything else?

Alkuin: No. — Helge, come.

Wittekind: Stop! Helge stays here!

Helge: Wittekind! I promised the king to return. I am a prisoner of war.

Wittekind (shuddering): It begins to grow lonely.

Helge: Once more you shall hear from me, Wittekind! There is one man we have forgotten in this base affair.

Wittekind: I would not know my Helge otherwise!

Helge: Farewell. (Exits with Alkuin.)

Albion (collapses at the table).

Wittekind (slowly lays his sword on the table): Done.

Curtain.

Fourth Act

Scene: Hall in the Cresburg on the Muhr. A crucifix on the axis of the room, windows on both sides. Long table. Wooden chairs. Doors right and left.

First Scene

Desiderius. Isidorus.

Desiderius: But my most reverend Lord Nuncio! We must not push our demands too far. Does the Church not have time? We must take a breathing-space in order to consolidate and secure the gains achieved. And without the trust of the newly converted, sources of danger can always break out again.

Isidorus: I know no breathing-space, Lord Chamberlain! Restlessly I consume myself in the unceasing struggle for the increase of the Holy Church, for the unshakable underpinning of the power of the Holy See in Rome. The Church has been served by the hasty baptism of the dukes. Need I remind you of the Rector of York, who reads the duke Wittekind's every wish from his eyes and fulfills it immediately? If barbarous Germany retains a population that is as stubborn-headed as the so-called Wittekinds, then the Church will have to endure many hard nuts whose hardness may one day even bring loss to the successor of Peter.

Desiderius: I do not presume to offer reflections about the strength of church fangs, most worthy one. The facts are as follows: The Saxony is pacified. The monasteries in Osnabrück and Münster, however, attest to the gain of the Church. And the baptism of Wittekind is also a fact.

Isidorus: That was done too early. The removal of the women has thereby become impossible, and precisely this measure would have been necessary to break the German blood. Today the women are even being fed and cared for and returned to their homes and are to be placed under Wittekind's protection at the Cresburg above. Only through lengthy work can one hope to break that stubborn German character.

Desiderius: By settling Frankish peasants in the depopulated parts of Westphalia.

Isidorus: If that is done from southern Gaul, then my wish is at least partially fulfilled. Better, however, would be to bring settlers from the Mediterranean.

Desiderius: And the harsh German winters?

Isidorus: One can get used to that. If we leave the German blood here unmingled, the Church will one day lose the game, even if it takes a thousand years. And then it will rightly be said that Wittekind has triumphed and not the Church.

Desiderius: I must agree with you there, Lord Nuncio. And I will support your designs with all my heart. But I beg you to proceed with every caution, for, as sad as it is, the king has left the endowment of our new monasteries to this Wittekind, and you know …

Isidorus (laughs): You want to reap the harvest! The abbot of Osnabrück shall have his trout pond, and the prior in Münster his orchard. Wittekind will not refuse these little favors if the Holy Father has shown him such grace.

Desiderius: Will you present him with laurel and chain today?

Isidorus: Not only that. I will hang them around his neck before the eyes of the Saxons and the Danes. I shall take pleasure in hearing the teeth of that sham-Christian grind.

Desiderius: Should we not consider meeting the duke with a little more love?

Isidorus: Love for the brokenhearted, but for the proud — humiliation. If humiliation leads to the desired contrition, then I shall be the first to meet Wittekind with true Christian love.

Desiderius: Of that I am convinced.

Isidorus: The rector is with Wittekind in his chamber?

Desiderius: Since early morning.

Isidorus: I would give much if I could cut through that fateful bond. I will speak with the king at the next opportunity. Skill will reach its goal here too. We still have our little means of making Karl compliant.

Second Scene

The same. Manfried. Ordino. Envoy from Denmark.

Desiderius: Peace be with you.

Manfried: And with you, Lord Chamberlain. (Greeting.)

Ordino (introduces): The envoy of King Siegfried of Denmark.

Third Scene

The same. Gerbold. Volker. Three Saxon leaders. (Silent, very measured greetings. The Saxons stand apart from the Danes.)

Isidorus: Dear brother Ordino, I ask you to inform the duke.

Ordino (goes to the door at right, knocks and opens it).

Wittekind (from within): We are coming!

Fourth Scene

The same. Wittekind. Alkuin with papers.

Wittekind: Good morning.

(The clerics bow. The Saxons and the Dane do not.)

Wittekind: I ask you to take your places without rank or precedence. Herr Alkuin here beside me, for reasons of convenience. The envoy of my royal father-in-law to my right; the other gentlemen as they please.

Envoy: I shall sit here. (Goes to the opposite end of the table.)

Wittekind (smiles and gestures).

Isidorus (quickly sits beside Wittekind. All take their seats.)

Wittekind: Rector of York, I suggest we follow German custom and first attend to the wishes of our guest — namely those of the envoy from Denmark.

Alkuin: Herr Envoy, I take this opportunity of your presence at Duke Wittekind's court to greet you, in the name of my lord and king Karolus Magnus — (the Saxons laugh) — most warmly. My king hopes that from this calm may soon arise friendly relations leading to a lasting peace.

Envoy (coldly): I have business only with Wittekind.

Alkuin: Then we have reached the conclusion quickly enough!

Wittekind: I had drawn attention to that.

Alkuin: It was a wish of the Lord Nuncio …

Isidorus: I merely expressed the hope that Lord Wittekind might take the opportunity to advocate for the readmission of missions in Denmark.

Wittekind: Is the envoy authorized for such a discussion?

Envoy: No.

Wittekind: I had pointed that out as well.

Isidorus: I had hoped that your zeal for the faith would make such a conversation possible nonetheless. Yet I see, to my great sorrow, that I was mistaken. It should have been easy to reach agreement with old comrades-in-arms. (Laughter among the Saxons.)

Wittekind: One need not be a nuncio of the Holy See to draw the appropriate conclusions from the cheerfulness of our dear guests.

Desiderius: We see that your help cannot be relied upon, Lord Duke. Yet I am convinced that in the future your love for your Lord and Savior will increasingly devote itself to the advancement of the Holy Church and her missions. This conviction is also that of the Holy Father in Rome, who greeted your decision to abandon resistance to the saving teachings of the Church with tears of emotion. A flood of love now pours forth upon the newly converted, the humble son of the Savior, and—

Wittekind (to Alkuin): Where do you have the deed of gift?

Alkuin (quietly): Here — fishponds at Osnabrück.

Wittekind: Forgive me, most reverend Lord Chamberlain, that I do not let you finish. I run the risk of losing my composure at your kindly words.

Desiderius: May I not express the thanks of the Holy Father for the donation of lands for the monasteries in Münster and Osnabrück?

Wittekind: Please. — I have, on the basis of a letter of hand from King Karolus Magnus (laughter among the Saxons) and in agreement with Herr Alkuin of York, added a few gifts from my own estates. — Here, Herr Chamberlain. May the pious brothers enjoy the trout in good condition. — And here, the orchard in Münster is not bad either.

Desiderius: I am deeply moved.

Wittekind: There's no need. The king is no worse a merchant than I — nor could he be. I am therefore pleased to inform the nuncio of the Holy See that Herr Karl, in return, has entrusted to me the selection of the Frankish settlers for the depopulated parts of Westphalia.

Isidorus (suppresses an angry movement).

Wittekind: Yes indeed, most reverend Lord Nuncio — entrusted to me. The orchards and fishponds have thus paid off. As for the matter itself, there is, happily, for the time being nothing to change — for I will insist on my document. I have requested of the king that the Frankish peasants be recruited from the regions of northern Gaul. There still live pure-blooded Germans. And only such can I use. And Herr Alkuin of York has promised me he will assist me in this with all his heart. I must therefore assume that the Holy Church has no objections to raise, since Herr Alkuin is one of the high ecclesiastical dignitaries who approve of this measure — though it is directed against the Church. — I trust, Herr Nuncio, you will gladly confirm this view.

Alkuin (leans back and smiles).

Isidorus: I have no objections to raise — quite the contrary. And I believe I must also confirm this. The Holy Father has commissioned me to bestow upon you, Lord Wittekind, as a sign of his overflowing love and grace, a consecrated crucifix of pure gold, upon a golden chain, to hang about your neck.
(He attempts to do so. Wittekind intercepts the chain and gently lays it, together with the crucifix, before him on the table.)

Wittekind: Forgive my confusion, Lord Nuncio of His Holiness. This honor comes so unexpectedly to me that I can scarcely find words to thank you for it. Firm in the conviction that the chain and cross have been given to one wholly unworthy, I nevertheless ask that you tell the Holy Father he could make me happiest of all if, to his magnanimous gift, he would add the assurance that he bears no grudge toward my German people of the Saxons for their bygone enmity.

Alkuin (shakes his head disapprovingly): I too, Lord Duke, have a greeting to convey — from my lord and king Karl of the Franks. He has ordered that the women and girls belonging to the region around the Crez Castle, who had to be removed from the war zone for their own safety, shall pass by your court. I assume this will occur within a few hours. Likewise, I can inform you that Lady Helge, daughter of the Apostle to the Saxons, has been pardoned for her defection from the Holy Church. The king has commanded that she return home with the other girls. Lady Helge has declared herself ready, as a token of final reconciliation with the Holy Church, to present to the Lord Nuncio — as representative of His Holiness in the German lands — a bouquet of young lilies of the valley.

Hauptmann: Hah!

Wittekind: That is my Helge! I know my Helge, Rector of York!

Alkuin (surprised): I see this news pleases you.

Isidorus: Then the girl has finally laid aside her proud spirit and become humble?

Desiderius: Then we need not give up hope, Lord Nuncio, that this German people will in time become a faithful, humble Christian people.

Wittekind (thoughtfully): Helge… (suddenly laughs softly).

Isidorus: What amuses you, Lord Wittekind?

Wittekind: I rejoice for my old comrade Helge — that she now wishes to fight with flowers.

Alkuin: We have nothing further to discuss, Lord Duke. Since our guests have requested to speak with you alone, I ask you, most reverend gentlemen, to leave the hall with me. I hope that we may gather again for the procession of the Saxon maidens returning to their homeland.

(Farewells. The clerics exit.)

Fifth Scene

The same, without the clerics.

Wittekind: Now come closer, men of Westphalia.

Volker: We'd rather stay seated here, Uncle Wittekind.

Wittekind: As you wish. — Lord Envoy of Denmark, how fares my beloved, the Duchess Geva? When does she intend to return to me?

Envoy: I will answer that question later. First I have news for you that will command your attention. Lord Albion of Verden, on a hunting expedition by the Elbe, has not returned. He has met with an accident.

Wittekind: Dead?

Envoy: Yes. — He sends you word that he could no longer bear the shame. He would rather be dead than a slave.

Wittekind (calmly): He was a faithful friend and comrade in arms. But his shoulders were not strong enough to bear what fate laid upon him.

Envoy: Is that all you have to say on the death of your best friend, Lord Wittekind?

Wittekind: Yes.

Envoy: Then King Siegfried of Denmark bids me ask you a question on which much depends. Are you prepared also to undertake a "hunt"?

Wittekind: Why not? — if I find the time. However, I am very cautious in handling weapons. An accident is therefore unlikely to befall me. Besides, after Albion's death, I must live doubly. (Murmurs of disapproval are heard.) I have only Lady Helge left. If I lose her, then I am alone — and therefore I must preserve my life. It would be very unfortunate if my eyes could no longer watch distrustfully over the courts of Rome and Aachen.

Envoy: Under those circumstances, I can now answer your question concerning your wife, Duchess Geva, Lord Wittekind. — She regrets that she can no longer live in close fellowship with a scoundrel and a traitor to his country…

Wittekind (clutches at his throat, then lets his hand fall).

Envoy: Therefore, Lady Geva renounces you and will not return to Westphalia. I have nothing more to say, and will take my leave. (He rises, bows to the Saxons, but not to Wittekind, and exits.)

Sixth Scene

(The same, without the envoy.)

Wittekind: Well, Volker? Perhaps you have kinder things to tell me than the envoy from Denmark.

Volker: Uncle Wittekind. After all I have heard here, I can be brief. You know that after you I am the eldest of your kin.

Wittekind: How old are you?

Volker: I will be seventeen years.

Wittekind: One cannot say that my kin spared blood when we still took up arms against Karl.

Volker: From today on I am the elder of the kin.

Wittekind: And I, my boy?

Volker: I have the task of telling you, Uncle Wittekind, that (with a breaking voice) the kin from now on has another member, who bears the name Wittekind.

Wittekind: Why?

Volker: Uncle Wittekind, it is really hard for me to say it — because you are what the envoy from Denmark said a short while ago.

Wittekind: True! He called me scoundrel and traitor to the country.

Volker: That is what he said.

Wittekind: My dear young rider. Then I must already resign myself to being cast out of the community by my own. They will probably be right if they do that. — Volker, dear German boy! If you later on, quite by accident, think of your uncle Wittekind, then always think of the Wittekind who fought fifteen years for Germany, not of the other Wittekind who acted so pitiably.

Volker: Uncle Wittekind!

Wittekind: And you yourself, Volker — guard your honor, remain a faithful, good German, bright and pure in body and soul. And take a bright woman who loves you. When you later have children, then look into them, into their eyes. If the All-Father wills it for you, perhaps you may one day recognize in a child's eyes the image of your traitorous uncle. — Perhaps.

Volker: Uncle Wittekind! You are not what people say!

Wittekind: How do you mean that?

Volker: I am still young, Uncle Wittekind. The others may be right. But there is a lie among it! Tell me one word, a single word, that it is not as the Saxons tell it at the hearth. You were the hero of our childhood dreams! I always boasted that you were my uncle. And if he falls in the fight against the Christians, I said, then I will be the new Wittekind. The Wittekinds do not die!

Wittekind: That is why I stand here, so that the Wittekinds do not die.

Volker: So you really betrayed people and land to Karl?

Wittekind (breathes heavily): Yes.

Volker: Uncle Wittekind, perhaps you were ill, did not know what you did! Perhaps you did not do it willingly! Perhaps the Rector of York lied to you. Uncle Wittekind, do not let me go from you like this!

Wittekind: I was not coerced. — I thought it all through. And the Rector of York did not lie to me.

Volker (gathers himself): Then I must go. (Exits.)

Seventh Scene

(The same, without Volker.)

Wittekind: I know what you bring, Gerbold, faithful man — and you, brave captains of my own war-band.

Gerbold: It chokes me, Wittekind, that I must say it to you.

Wittekind: Say it quickly, that we may both be freed.

Gerbold: After so long a time, Wittekind. And after such a war! Had you not sworn to us never to leave us?

Wittekind: That I had, old comrade in arms.

Gerbold: Before the dead whom the butcher Karl murdered?!

Wittekind: And an hour later I broke my word.

Gerbold: My lord duke! After fifteen years! My captains here were still children when we began, Wittekind — when we took the weapons from under the straw in Manfried's farm and dragged the paternoster-fighters from their beds! If only we had hanged them then! We had them all together so nicely. — Wittekind, and now! After fifteen years!

Wittekind (turns away).

Gerbold (steps closer): My lord duke. I am an old man and I know that one cannot set everything right in a long life. Wittekind, don't be angry with me — but today I am the Gerbold, and you are the Wittekind! Wittekind, can you no longer look at me? Shall I shake you by the shoulders?! Was the young Volker right — that there's a lie behind it all? Has some cur of a devil had his filthy hand in it? (Silence.) Wittekind, after fifteen years!

Wittekind (makes a desperate gesture).

Gerbold (insistent): Wittekind! I have here my old silver beaker. You've often drunk from it, when your wounds festered. It's dented, but with a small hammer one could make it straight again. — Will you have it, Wittekind?

Wittekind (reaches behind him, takes the beaker): Thank you.

Gerbold: Then tell me, Wittekind. Are you a scoundrel?

Wittekind (is silent).

Gerbold: Wittekind, I have in all my life never knelt before any man and no god. I always thought it indecent. — Wittekind, today this old man kneels before you! Make my last days bright! I want nothing from you, only tell me that Volker is right — that you are not the traitor men take you for. Wittekind, are you a scoundrel?!

Wittekind (bursting out): Out!

Gerbold: I'm not going, Wittekind, until you've told me! — After fifteen years!

Wittekind (strikes the bronze vessel on the table).

Eighth Scene

The same. Servant.

Servant: My lord duke.

Wittekind: Take the knights out!

Gerbold: We're going already, Wittekind. I didn't mean it badly, and I didn't wish to wound you. — Here is my hand. No one else has given it to you. I'll do it, Wittekind — for the sake of the fifteen years.

Wittekind (silent, reaches his hand backward to Gerbold. Gerbold, the three captains, and the servant exit.)

Ninth Scene

Wittekind. Servant.

Wittekind (looks at the beaker with a pained smile, then carefully sets it on the table, sinks heavily into his wooden chair): All-Father!

(He props his head in his hand and leafs through the papers Alkuin has left behind. Strikes the bronze vessel.)

Servant (at the door): My lord?

Wittekind: I request the Rector of York.

Servant (exits).

Tenth Scene

Wittekind. Alkuin.

Alkuin: I saw the old friends go down, my lord duke. It cannot have been easy?

Wittekind: It went.

Alkuin: You received a beaker as a farewell gift?

Wittekind: Yes, from Gerbold. — The old beaker is so dented it can hardly be called round anymore, but I know: Gerbold's old heart clung to that cup.

Alkuin: If the Lord God were loved as faithfully by His own as you are by your Saxons, the earth would be a paradise.

Wittekind: But now they have had their fill of me. And it is good that it's over. I could not have endured it much longer. I had to have poor Gerbold thrown out — and he had been my best comrade in arms since the war began.

Alkuin: And the Duchess?

Wittekind: It has happened as I suspected. Lady Geva has renounced me. She is, after all, an honorable woman. Albion is dead — killed in a hunting accident. And so forth. Enough of that. — How stands it with the rebuilding of the burned farms? Karl wants to lend me the money for it. That's very kind of him, but the conditions are too hard. To pay interest, as he demands, is out of the question. Besides, we don't know that practice in Germany. I've made a counter-proposal that I worked out last night. I must hand over the land for the settlers without payment. That's not just. You'll probably tell me there are no heirs to be wronged, but… (He listens. Suddenly a loud commotion in the house — cries for help, scuffling, a heavy thud.)

Alkuin: What can that be?

Wittekind: Please see what it is, Herr Alkuin.

Alkuin (hastily exits).

Helge (outside): Wittekind!

Wittekind (springs up, pressing his fists to his chest):
Lilies-of-the-valley — for the Nuncio!!

Eleventh Scene

Wittekind. Helge.

Helge (bursts the door open and bolts it behind her. Lays a dagger and a bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on the table.)

Wittekind (exultant): Helge!

Helge: I stabbed him, Wittekind! Do you know whom?

Wittekind: Yes! Yes! Three times yes!!

Helge: Whom?

Wittekind: The Nuncio from Rome!!

Helge: Have I done right, Wittekind?

Wittekind: Yes, yes, yes!!

Helge: That was the man we forgot in that filthy bargain. (Suddenly she grows soft.) Wittekind — for the murder of an envoy stands death. We must now take leave of one another.

Wittekind (in rapture): Helge — my Helge!

Helge (at Wittekind's neck): Say it to me now. When the war began, I begged you for it. Now I have waited fifteen years. Wittekind — that was a long time.

Wittekind: And you always knew that I loved only you, only you! Proud, hard woman — now you are so different. I knew that too. I carried you in my arms when you were a child, I stroked your blond hair when you were a young maiden. And then came the war.

Helge: I was never happier than in those fifteen years.

Wittekind: Helge — Helge! (Silent embrace.) I never knew I was so rich.

Helge: Who is as rich as I? What girl can say that she is loved by Wittekind?

Wittekind: You — my pride, my joy, and my deepest pain! (Heavy blows at the door.)

Voice (outside): Open, in the name of the king!

Wittekind and Helge (stand transfixed).

Voice (outside): Open, in the name of the king!

Helge (frees herself): Come in! (She pulls back the bolt and flings the door wide open.)

Twelfth Scene

The same. Alkuin. Manfried. Captain. Soldiers.

Alkuin: The Nuncio lies murdered on the stairs!

Wittekind: I know it.

Manfried: My child, what have you done! Helge — you, the daughter of the Apostle of the Saxons! Helge! Helge!

Helge: Are you looking for me?

Captain: Helge, Manfried's daughter — we saw you give a bouquet of flowers to the envoy of the Holy See. The Nuncio fell, and you fled with a bloody dagger. Did you stab the envoy of His Holiness?

Helge: Did you truly think Helge would bring only lilies-of-the-valley — and not also the thanks of the German women? I brought both! The Nuncio fell by my hand. — Now the war is over.

Alkuin: Helge! Did you not think how merciful the king had been to you? Now you have committed a crime that can never be undone. What have you done to Wittekind!

Helge (softly): Wittekind? — Wittekind? I have given the German duke the last love I had to give. I had nothing more.

Captain: In the name of the king.

Helge: I go with you of my own will. Do not lay hands upon me, Captain. (With one last look toward Wittekind, she exits. Door closes.)

Thirteenth Scene

Wittekind, Manfried, Alkuin

Wittekind (calls out): Helge!!

Helge (outside): Wittekind! (Echoing.) Wittekind!

Manfried (sobbing at the table, broken).

Alkuin: It is terrible! The child can no longer be saved.

Wittekind: As though you did not know perfectly well who the guilty one is, Herr Rector of York!

Alkuin (in torment): Yes — yes.

Wittekind: That was the last. Now it has grown silent around me.

Alkuin: I still cannot grasp it!

Wittekind: Does shame burn you over that scoundrel's trick? I can understand! — So you have taken everything from me: happiness, honor, love! All so that Lord Karolus Magnus may have a spotless imperial crown, and the Pope may adorn himself with an immaculate miter. Must it always be so — that decent men are dragged through the filth, while the knaves are rewarded with crowns? Deceive yourself not, Rector of York. The last word will be spoken by the German people. Not now — later, Herr Alkuin, later, when it grows bright again in Germany.

Alkuin: I beg you, my lord duke — you forget…

Wittekind: Right! — But you understand me? (Goes to Manfried.)

Manfried (grasping Wittekind's hand): Help me, Wittekind.

Wittekind (shakes his head): Not in the way you mean.

Manfried: What have I done, that the Lord Jesus lays such a heavy burden upon me?

Wittekind: Such burdens must be borne. — We have both become a little lonely now, Father, each on his own. Why should we not try to bear the burden together? If it is too heavy for you, there is still a little space on my shoulder. I will help to carry it. — Stay with me.

Manfried: I cannot, Wittekind. The Nuncio gave me, before his death, the command to go as a missionary into the forests of the Elbe country. My highest duty is obedience.

Wittekind: Perhaps a better mission can be found for you. The king has asked me, through the Rector of York, to choose a confessor. Can I give the king greater joy than if Herr Alkuin reports to him that I have chosen my old adversary — the Apostle of the Saxons — as my confessor? … And if the confessing does not always go smoothly, if your heart too should once grow heavy, Father, then we can confess to each other — you to me, I to you. Shall it be so?

Manfried (presses his white head against Wittekind's hand): Wittekind!

(From afar, the voices of girls singing are heard. The song grows clearer.)

Wittekind (listens): Are they the ones?

Alkuin: Yes, my lord duke. Your Saxon maidens are passing by.

Wittekind (gently freeing himself from Manfried, goes to the window; the song grows louder): Yes — there they come!

Alkuin (takes Manfried's hand, quietly opens the door; exits with him, unnoticed by Wittekind).

Fourteenth Scene

Wittekind (alone)

Wittekind: They wear white dresses — flowers in their hair. (Pause.) They sing into the spring, my fair-haired maidens of Westphalia. They did not know what was being played out! — Do you see, Herr Alkuin, now something like a deep happiness steals into my lonely heart. It seems to me that I have done right after all, when I see my women — bright, tall, white, and blond! A beautiful race, that the All-Father loves. (Pause.) You may now write in your chronicle whatever you please, Herr Alkuin. Honor and blood, health and the German soul of sixty thousand northern women are surely worth the honor of a German duke. No one will ever know why that incomprehensible Wittekind

betrayed his people! — But, Herr Alkuin, when after many hundreds of years a wanderer comes to Westphalia and sees, by the old timbered farmhouse, the blond children playing, and hears on the branches of the high oak the robin singing — do you know what the little bird sings to the wanderer? (Exultantly.)

"Wittekind! Wittekind!"

As though the little one wished to say quite clearly — that the German duke was not such a great scoundrel after all.

(Wittekind turns his head; stands still as the hall lies empty. Darkness.)

End.